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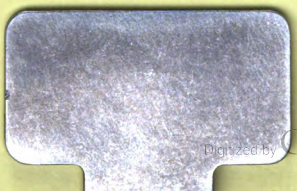

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JUST AS I AM

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET,'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

In Three Volumes

VOL. III.

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JUST AS I AM.

CHAPTER I.

I MUST BIDE MY TIME.

Mr. JEBB put his hand into the cavity where the seven bottles of whisky had been, and groped among the sawdust and cobwebs; not with the hope of making any discovery, but in utter helplessness and bewilderment. Suddenly, as his hand explored the brickwork, a new and awful light flashed on his mind. Four or five of the bricks had been loosened and removed, and put back again in their places. They yielded to his touch. He pulled them out one by one, and beheld a gap through which the robber could easily have put his hand and pulled out the bottles. The whole thing was clear: the theft had been but

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too easy. The cellar wall backed upon the stable yard, and anybody in that yard could have removed the bricks. It must have been a work of time; a work to be done under cover of night and darkness; for it had to be so neatly done as to escape the master's eye. Who could have done this but the characterless groom, the waif, whose soddened appearance had impressed Mr. Jebb in the first instance, but to whose vices he had been willingly blind when he found that the man suited his purpose?

Mr. Jebb had not a doubt as to Tinker's guilt. He rushed out of the cellar, locking the door hurriedly. Alas! what availed lock or bolt when his wall had been violated? He hurried by the back door to the stable yard, heedless of the rain which fell upon his uncovered head, and unearthed Tinker in his shed among the empty bottles, harness, and boots.

The man smelt of whisky. Yes, the wretch reeked with the evidence of his crime. He had taken advantage of a wet afternoon to leave his harness uncleaned. He sat nodding over a newspaper, with an empty mug beside him; and mug and man alike sent forth the odour of choicest Glenlivat.

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'You villain!' cried Shafto, 'what have you done with those seven bottles of whisky? You thief, you undermining vagabond, you—you Guy Faux! Get out of my place—begone—or I'll give you in charge for burglary. By heavens I'd do it, if I were not ashamed of my own folly in harbouring such a scoundrel.'

Tinker at first denied his guilt, then grew sullen, grumbled an oath or two, collected his few rags in a bundle, and walked out of the yard, Mr. Jebb escorting him. But on the threshold he stopped, snapped his fingers in the face of his late employer, and exclaimed:—

'Do you think I want your beggarly place? I can get a better in an hour if I like to ask for it. Sir Everard Courtenay will take me, I'll warrant. He wouldn't dare to refuse, knowing what I know.'

The man was tolerably far gone in whisky, drunk enough to be reckless, sober enough to know what he was saying.

Upon Shafto Jebb's ear the man's speech fell unheeded. His brain was fired by his great wrong, and he could think of nothing else. Seven bottles of that splendid whisky, the gift of a friend who

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was not likely to be again so generous! And to think that this wretch, by loosening a few crumbling old red bricks, had been able to get at the very spot in which Mr. Jebb had so carefully bestowed the choicest treasure of his cellar! The thing was fiendish.

'Get out of the place,' he roared, 'or I'll kick you out.'

'Not without my week's wages,' said the man.

'You may whistle for your wages. You've had seven bottles of my choicest whisky, and Heaven knows what besides. Get out, you house-breaking vampire.'

The man walked sulkily away, and, turning to go back to his violated cellar, in order to see how the brickwork could be most speedily made solid and secure, Mr. Jebb found himself face to face with Jane Barnard.

'Oh, if you please, sir, my mistress sent me out with your coat and hat, and will you go in directly, she says, for fear of adding to your cold?'

'Hang my cold!' cried Shafto savagely, 'I want a bricklayer.'

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'A bricklayer, sir?'

'Yes, woman, a bricklayer, to wall up a cellar. Run down the village and tell Dubbs the builder to send me his man directly, with a few new bricks and a hod of mortar.'

Mrs. Barnard did not wait to be bidden twice. There was a fine drizzling rain falling, and she had no covering on her neat, sleek head, except the little muslin cap which was her badge of servitude; but she ran out of the yard as fast as her active feet could carry her, and once outside, stopped and looked about her.

There stood the dismissed drudge, leaning against the palings of a cottage garden a little way down the road, despondently contemplative of a litter of black pigs which were walking up and down the prostrate form of their female parent as coolly as if she had been a grassy hill-side. Mrs. Barnard had to pass the man on her way to the builder's, and even if Mr. Jebb had been watching her, which he was not, it would scarcely have seemed strange that she should linger for half a minute to speak to him.

'I want a few minutes' talk with you,' she said.

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'It will be for your advantage. Meet me at nine o'clock to-night in the lane behind the Homestead.'

'You don't mean no harm agen poor old Tinker?'

'What harm should I mean? Haven't I always been kind to you?'

'You have,' whimpered the maudlin wretch, exhaling whisky. 'You're the right sort, and I'll trust you. Nine o'clock? I'll be there. I'll take a nap in old Hazel's hay-stack between whiles.'

Farmer Hazel's rick-yard was close to the surgeon's untidy kitchen-garden, the Homestead having once been the dwelling-house attached to Farmer Hazel's land.

Tinker seemed in earnest, and Mrs. Barnard was fain to believe him, and to go on with her day's work, waiting anxiously for nine o'clock; by which hour the children would be in bed, and the nurse might count upon a brief interval of freedom.

The rain had ceased after dark, and when Mrs. Barnard went out to keep her appointment the sky had cleared, and a few stars were shining through the gray. She told the cook she was going up the village to get some darning cotton at the shop,

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knowing that as, in a general way, half an hour's gossip accompanied the smallest transaction at that compendious repository, she might be out for some time without exciting wonder by her absence.

She went down the narrow cinder path between the gooseberry and currant bushes, and rank overgrown onions, and let herself out by a little gate at the bottom of the garden, which opened into a narrow lane between the Homestead and Farmer Hazel's rick-yard. A little way down this lane stood the broad five-barred gate leading into the rick-yard, and on the top rail sat a slouching figure, which Mrs. Barnard knew must be that of the dismissed groom.

He had slept off his intoxication, and was now in a somewhat morose and depressed condition, the outlook before him being far from hopeful.

'Well, Mrs. Nurse,' he grumbled, as Jane Barnard approached him. 'Here I am a-dancing attendance upon your ladyship's pleasure, and yet I don't suppose you'll give me the price of a night's lodging.'

'There you are mistaken,' said Jane cheerfully.

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'I am not quite so hard-hearted as you think. I'm a poor working woman, but as far as half a sovereign goes——'

'Half a quid,' cried Tinker. 'You're a duchess. Make it a whole one, and I'll say you're a reg'lar trump.'

'If you'll tell me what I want to know—speaking the truth fully and frankly—I'll give you a sovereign for your trouble; I'd do so even if it were the last coin I had in the world. When you were leaving the yard this afternoon you spoke of Sir Everard Courtenay—you spoke as if you knew something—something of his past history which he would not like everybody to know.'

The man was still seated on the gate, his shrunken figure bent nearly double, a short clay pipe in the corner of his mouth, from which he slowly sent forth a puff of rank tobacco now and then.

Mrs. Barnard stood close to him, holding the gate, speaking in a low, earnest voice.

The wind had risen since the rain had ceased, and the tall poplars in the hedgerow were rustling and creaking with a monotonous ebb and flow of sound,

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which prevented Mrs. Barnard or her companion hearing another sound near at hand, the fall of a stealthy footstep on the other side of the tangled blackberry hedge which screened Mr. Jebb's kitchen-garden from the vulgar gaze. The footsteps travelled slowly along the weedy path inside the hedge, and came to a dead stop just opposite the gate on which Tinker had perched himself.

'I'm not going to tell you what I know about him,' said Tinker, in a sullen tone. 'A quid, indeed! I should want forty quids. Do you suppose I couldn't turn my knowledge to better account with the baronight himself.'

'I'm sure you couldn't.'

'Why?'

'Because if you'd been able to make money out of him in all these years, you'd have done it.'

'What do you mean by all these years?' asked Tinker, in tones of increasing surliness.

'I mean that whatever knowledge you have about Sir Everard Courtenay is knowledge that came to you twenty years ago last October.' The man flinched, and looked at the speaker sharply from under his

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shaggy brows. 'And that if you could have traded upon it in the meanwhile, you would have traded upon it. You're not the man to neglect a chance of that kind.'

Tinker gave an inward chuckle.

'You're about right,' he said. 'I should have screwed him uncommon tight if it hadn't been in his power to screw me. But I'll screw him yet, proud devil. I've got so low down that I'm pretty nigh as reckless as that man Vargas; and though I won't go so far as to put my neck in a noose, I might risk being a lifer if I could put a rope round that stiff neck of his.'

'Do it,' cried Jane Barnard, tremulous with excitement, and clutching the man's bony wrist with her nervous hand. 'Do it! I'll help you. Shall I tell you who I am? Yes, I will: and then perhaps you'll trust me, and help me. I am Humphrey Vargas's daughter. I want to prove that it was not he who murdered Mr. Blake. I want to clear his name of that crime if I can, for the sake of my children; or else when they grow up to be men and women and are working their way honestly in the

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world—to the front rank perhaps, for they live in a free country where there is nothing to keep them back—people will be able to bring it up against them that their grandfather was a murderer. I want to find the real murderer. I know who he is, and you know, and I believe Mr. Jebb knows, but it's only I that would risk my life to prove it.'

'Humph,' muttered the vagabond, looking at her curiously, as if such intensity of purpose were inexplicable to his jaded soul. 'You're a rum 'un. Supposing I could help you to bring the murder home to the right party. Supposin' it should suit my temper to stand up in a witness-box and tell what I know—what would you give me for the risk I ran?'

'My husband is in a small way of business, working hard for every dollar he earns; but if your evidence can clear my father's name of the stain of murder I will give you a hundred pounds.'

'How can I be sure of the money? Your husband's in America. When I've done what you want I may whistle for my reward. What security can you give me?'

Jane Barnard was silent. This question, which

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seemed a natural one for the man to ask, was a difficult one for her to answer. What security could she offer—a stranger in the land?

She could think of only one person who would be likely to help her in this matter, and that was Morton Blake. But even of his help she could not be certain; for heretofore he had been deaf to her pleading. Yet could she but offer him evidence of her father's innocence he could hardly refuse to help her. Might he not be more ready to do so now that the tie between him and Miss Courtenay was broken?

'If Mr. Blake were willing to be my security,' said Jane Barnard, 'would you believe me then?'

'I'd believe *him*,' grumbled the man. 'He's good for a hundred pound. You bring him to me at any place appointed, and let him give his word to pay me a cool hundred the day I give my evidence against Sir Everard Courtenay, and I don't mind risking the witness-box. For it is a risk to me. There's things might be brought up again me by people with plaguey long memories; but if I once get clean out of the court and my hundred down, I'd soon be clean out o' the country. And I should like to have a shy at Sir

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Everard before I kick the bucket. He was a trifle too high-handed with me twenty years ago, and I was a fool to take things as quietly as I did.'

'I will try to see Morton Blake to-morrow,' said Mrs. Barnard, 'and if your evidence is really worth having——'

'Worth having!' cried Tinker, who by recalling past injuries which had rankled in his mind for years had worked himself into a feverish condition; 'why, my evidence can prove that on the night of the murder Sir Everard Courtenay—a gentleman that was always regular and orderly in his habits, always one of the earliest to come home from the hunt,—never being more than a half-hearted sportsman—didn't get home till nine o'clock, and they'd killed their fox not six mile from Austhorpe at five, mind you, and rode into the stable-yard all over mud, with his horse dead beat and dead lame, and cut about as I had never seen any horse of his cut since I'd been second groom at Fairview.'

'Oh,' said Mrs. Barnard, 'then you were in his service at the time?'

'Of course I was,' answered Tinker. 'How

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should I have known anything about it if I wasn't? I was in the yard when he came in, waiting to take his horse; for the head groom had ridden off to Highclere, to get another doctor for my lady, who was lying dangerously ill. He was as pale as a ghost, and he just got off his horse, and chucked the bridle to me, and walked indoors without a word. I noticed that he'd lost one of his spurs, but I didn't think much about that. It was his looks and the horse's condition that took my attention. "There's bad news for you indoors," says I to myself, "and you look bad enough already, just as if you knew what was coming." It was about an hour after when the groom came back, driving the Highclere doctor in Sir Everard's dogcart. They had passed the place where Mr. Blake had been found, and had heard all about the murder.'

'Did not the head groom, or any one else in the house, make any remark about Sir Everard's being out so unusually late?' asked Mrs. Barnard.

'I don't know that anybody did. You see the whole house was upset about my lady. She was lying at death's door, poor thing, and nobody could think

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of anything or anybody else. Before the clock struck twelve she was dead, and Austhorpe bell, that had been tolling for Mr. Blake, began to toll for her. That night was a fine harvest for the sexton!'

'Did you see Sir Everard next day?' asked Mrs. Barnard.

'No, he was shut up in the room with his dead wife. They say he hardly left her till her coffin was carried out of the house. Early next morning, pretty nigh as soon as it was light, I was at the place where the murder was done—I knew the spot by what Jake, the groom, had told me, close against the pollard oak—and there were the footprints of the men who had carried away the body, and the grass all trampled and beaten where the corpse had been dragged out of the ditch. I don't know what made me grope about and examine the place, for there wasn't much to see—idle curiosity I suppose; but the more I hung about the spot—the muddy ditch, and the broken hedge above it, and the bank, with the footprints of a horse sharpened off by a light morning frost,—the more I had Sir Everard and his white face, and his hunter all over muck and

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mire, in my mind. I couldn't give over puzzling myself why he should have been out so late on that particular night, and why he should have come home in such a state, him as was one of the neatest of riders, and used to bring his horse home as fresh as paint. I stood loitering about like, smoking my morning pipe, and looking at the place, when all at once I spied something glittering in the thick brambly hedge just below the ragged gap that showed where a horse had been over it. What could it be? Some of the plunder which the murderer had pitched there in his haste to be off. A pencil-case or a silver whistle, I thought: nothing much, or the fellow would have nobbled it. I sprang across the ditch, and scrambled up the bank, and parted the brambles, and there I found a spur stuck fast, with one of the straps and buckles hanging to it, just as it had been torn off, as the horse broke through the hedge. It was a tough blackthorn branch that had done it. I knew the spur for Sir Everard's by the make of it, and I should have known it for his anywhere, even if I had not noticed the missing spur as he walked across the yard overnight. I put

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it into my pocket, and jumped back into the road just as the police-constable and his pal came up to search the place; but I didn't say a word to either of them as to what I'd found. "Pretty clear where you was last night, Sir Everard, and what you was doing," says I to myself; "you gentlefolks gives way to your evil passions just as often as the poorest of us, though all the catechism books teaches us different." '

'Did you tell any one what you had found?' asked Jane Barnard.

'No: I kept turning the whole business over in my mind, for I wanted to find the way as I could best make my own account of it. If I was to up and tell everythink at the inquest, what should I be the better off for my evidence? Not a mag. I might put a rope round Sir Everard's neck; but that wouldn't put a coat on my back, or give me a dinner. My lay was to keep dark, and get all I could out of Sir Everard. "I've got you under my thumb," I said to myself, "and I'll make you pay the piper." Ay, and I'll make him pay yet,' he added with a savage chuckle, 'though the reckoning has been put off above twenty years.'

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'How was it you failed to make him pay for your silence, then?' asked Mrs. Barnard.

'Never you mind. That's my business. Perhaps I didn't manage the affair as well as I might have done; perhaps I carried things a trifle too high, and was too cocksure of his knocking under and bleeding freely. Anyhow, he rounded upon me; and instead of having him in my power, I found it was me that was under his thumb; and instead of getting a handsome price for my secret I got kicked out like a dog, and had to choose between cutting my lucky or getting into quod. There'd been a trifle of picking and stealing in the stables, you see, and I was in it as well as the rest—perhaps I was a little deeper in than the rest—and the upshot was that I found myself without a place and without a character, and with my gentleman's odd spur for my only portable property. Well, I was a careless, roving kind of dog in those days, and I didn't much mind where I went as long as I had snug quarters and good grub; so I didn't feel getting the sack, and I thought I'd bide my time. I went into Leicestershire, and got a berth in a hunting

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stable; for when a man can handle a horse as I could in those days, and is a smartish chap to look at into the bargain, character don't go for much. I told Lord Bullfinch's stud groom as I'd had a row with my master, and had got kicked out for cheeking him, and I was took on without another question; and for the next ten years my life was pleasant enough, always falling on my feet somehow. But I was never the kind of chap to save money, and by-and-by things began to go dead again me; and then it was all down hill—never no change in my luck except from bad to worse—till the day your governor found me hanging about the yard of the Peacock, glad to earn a few pence for a night's shelter, or a mouthful of spirits to keep the rheumatics out of my wretched old bones.'

'And in all the days of your poverty did you never appeal to Sir Everard?'

'Didn't I, just? I wrote to him when I was hard up, pitching it very humble you know, and saying that though I knew facts connected with Mr. Blake's death as might be inconvenient for him to have bandied about, I was the last of men to make use of

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my knowledge, but that I was in an awful fix for a ten-pound note, and must get it some ways or other. At first he was civil, and used to send me the money; but without a word, just as you'd throw a dog a bone. Then one day there comes a letter from his valet, to say that Sir Everard having been lately imposed upon by various begging-letter writers, had made up his mind to take no further notice of any such appeals, and that if I wrote again he would place the matter in the hands of the police. Rough upon me, wasn't it? Well, I didn't write again: but I contrived one day to waylay my gentleman just as he was leaving the Town Hall at Highclere after a magistrates' meeting. He looked uncommon proud and uncommon handsome as he came out of the hall, with his figure well set up, and his head held high, swinging a heavy cane hunting crop as he walked along. He'd left his horse at the Peacock, and it was in the narrow lane that leads from the Town Hall to the market-place—a short cut, don't you know—that I accosted him. I'd followed him into the lane, and it seemed a nice retired spot for me to say what I had to say. Well, there's no need to go into our

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conversation. Instead of giving me a civil answer, he turned upon me like a devil, clutched me by the collar, and, getting me into an angle of the wall where I had no more power to fight him than if I'd been a baby, he belaboured me with his hunting crop till there was hardly enough life in me to shriek murder. He threatened that if ever I dared to address him again he'd beat me in the same way. He laughed at what he called my impudent pretence of knowing something that might injure him if it were known to all the world. Of course there was no policeman on the scene till my gentleman had gone, and there was I, with every bone aching, to get my revenge as best I might. "Take out a summons against him for assault and battery," says the constable. "Yes, but where's the witness to prove my case?" asks I. What would have been the good of my taking my poor old bones before a magistrate to swear the peace against such a fine gentleman as Sir Everard Courtenay. "No, my man," says I, "it's a case of grin and bear it." I must bide my time.'

The church clock chimed the half-hour.

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'I must get back to the house,' said Mrs. Barnard. 'There's the tray to be taken into the parlour for Mr. Jebb's grog.'

It was the surgeon's custom to comfort himself before going to bed with the light refreshment of a glass of gin and water and a biscuit or two. Jane Barnard brought out a well-worn leather purse, from which she extracted some silver.

'Here are five shillings,' she said. 'Get yourself a supper and a bed at the Sugar-Loaves, and meet me at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon on Tangley Common, just in front of the Manor House gates. I shall have seen Mr. Blake, most likely, by that time, and shall know what is the best way of going to work.'

The man turned the shillings over in his palm with a dissatisfied air.

'You said you was going to stand a quid,' he muttered. 'Five bob ain't much after waiting your convenience all these blessed hours.'

'It's more than enough to get you a supper, a bed, and a breakfast,' answered Jane, firmly, 'if you don't waste any of it upon drink. If I were to give

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you more you'd go muddling your brains with spirits, and I want you to have all your wits about you to-morrow. Remember, I mean to carry this business through.'

'So do I,' answered the man, 'but I must be paid for my trouble. I shall expect a pound or two from you to-morrow, mind.'

'You shall have it. Good-night.'

'Good-night,' growled Tinker.

Mrs. Barnard ran back to the house, and began bustling about the kitchen getting her tray ready. The kettle was boiling on the hob, ready for the evening potations.

'Well, if you haven't stopped gossiping above a bit,' exclaimed the cook, looking up from a greasy copy of last week's *News of the World*, where she had been spelling out a diabolical murder in Whitechapel. 'You must have found Mrs. Simcox uncommon pleasant. What was you talking about?'

'Old times,' answered Jane briefly.

She carried the tray and tea-kettle to the family sitting-room, but to her surprise Mr. Jebb, whom she had last seen ensconced in his arm-chair, with his

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feet on the fender and a Cashmere shawl tied round his head, was no longer there.

'Has master been sent for, ma'am?' she asked of the patient wife, who sat at her Penelope task of darning stockings which her active children trampled into holes as fast as she mended them.

'No, Jane, I didn't hear of anybody calling for him. He went into the surgery a little while ago to make up some medicine, and I dare say he's there now.'

Mrs. Barnard opened the surgery door and peeped in. The oil lamp was burning low on the counter where Mr. Jebb pounded his drugs and rolled out his pills, and the room was empty.

'He's not there, ma'am,' said Jane.

'Then I suppose somebody sent for him. I thought I heard the door shut half an hour ago. And now he will go increasing his cold. And he is so cross when he has one of those influenza colds. Do you see if his coat and hat are gone off the peg, Jane?'

'Yes, ma'am. They're gone.'

'I wonder who could have wanted him? He told me this afternoon he wouldn't budge for any-

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body. But the loss of that whisky made him quite wild. I never saw him so put out since I can remember; and then he stood in the rain ever so long watching the bricklayer mend the wall. I'm afraid he'll be ill.'

Mrs. Barnard was too full of her own thoughts to be properly sympathetic. She stirred the fire, swept the hearth, set the tray in its proper place, keeping silence all the while. Then, just as she was going to leave the room she said,—

'Oh, if you please, ma'am, could you let me have a couple of hours to myself to-morrow? I want to go out for a little, after the early dinner.'

'Well, yes, Jane. I suppose I must spare you.'

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CHAPTER II.

TINKER BREAKS HIS TRYST.

On the day after Jane's long conversation with Tinker, Morton Blake received the following brief note, just as he was beginning his breakfast:—

'Humphrey Vargas's daughter, Mrs. Barnard, who called upon Mr. Blake a few days after her father's trial, will take the liberty of calling again to-day at half-past two o'clock. She earnestly begs Mr. Blake to receive her, as she has a communication of the utmost importance to make to him.'

This was a startling letter for Morton Blake. He had supposed until this moment that Mrs. Barnard had gone quietly back to America soon after her father's fate had been decided; and here she was at his door, eager to make some mysterious communication, perhaps to goad him to that course of action which was always present to his mind, but from which he shrank with ever-increasing horror.

Since his conversation with his aunt, his heart

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had inclined more to mercy than to vengeance. She had shown him the story of the past in a new light —his father, the betrayer rather than the betrayed— his father's violent death a savage act of vengeance, and not a cold-blooded murder. Was it, indeed, thus that stern justice, holding her inflexible scales between the murderer and the murdered, would compel him to consider that crime which had smitten Walter Blake in the flower of his age, and left the son, who so fondly loved him, fatherless? His blood boiled within him when he remembered that cruel death—but when he thought of a husband's wrongs, a bosom-friend betrayed, he could almost have pitied the assassin. And to strike Sir Everard would be to crush Dulcie, to inflict a life-long grief upon that tender, loving heart, to poison the current of the fair young life, to blast every joy and every hope of the innocent soul. Could he do this?—he, Morton Blake, who had so dearly loved her, who believed that he must go on loving her till the end of his days? No. His hand should not strike the blow. His lips should not utter the words which were to wither the life

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that was so precious to him. Whatever his duty to the dead might be, his duty to the living was even more sacred. He had seen the whole thing in a new and holier light since he and Dora Blake had spoken together plainly. That long, weary illness, and the still more weary return to health, had given him ample leisure for self-communion, for thinking out the question of the future in its every aspect. Perhaps that awful consciousness of having been so near death had also exercised a softening influence upon his mind, and helped to bring about the change of feeling which had arisen since the October night when he paced the gardens at Fairview, thirsting for the blood of his father's murderer.

'My poor, sweet, loving Dulcie,' he thought, full of tenderness for his lost love. 'Let me think how my father, the most chivalrous of men, would have me deal with you, could he see our position and all its difficulties. Would he bid me avenge him, at the price of your broken heart? Would he, whose one sin was to have loved your mother too dearly, have her daughter's life blighted?'

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In such a mood as this Morton Blake looked forward with the utmost distaste to his interview with Mrs. Barnard. He decided upon receiving her, and hearing all she had to say; but he was predetermined as to his own course.

He had come of late to face the future with a settled purpose to make the best of a life out of which, as he believed, all gladness had gone for ever. He saw no possibility of happiness, no prospect of new ties. He had loved and done with love. He had outlived all passionate hopes, all tender dreams. But happily ambition—which he called the desire to be useful to his fellow-men—was not dead in him. The embers of that manly fire had burned very low, but Elizabeth Hardman had fanned them into flame. Encouraged by her he had taken up the theme of national education, which had always been near his heart. At first he had worked with a dull, stolid determination to plough through his subject, however faint his interest, however weary his soul. But very soon that earnest love of work which was in his very nature had asserted itself, and toil and study had again been made sweet to him.

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'I think now that the dearest hopes of my life have been disappointed, I am just the right kind of man for the House of Commons,' he told Lizzie Hardman; 'a machine capable of so many hours' work every day, with no foolish longings for leisure or the sweet frivolities of domestic life, a man made of cast-iron, and always in working order.'

And now just when he had become wholly absorbed in public work, and when the idea of the approaching contest at Blackford had put darker thoughts out of his mind, here was Jane Barnard, with all the painful associations that were inseparable from her name.

She was shown into Morton's study, where he was sitting at his desk alone. He had been unable to go on with his work, in nervous expectation of her coming, and had spent a comparatively idle morning, reading first newspapers and then books in a desultory way which was the very reverse of his usual method.

'I did not like to refuse to see you,' he said, rising to receive her, and motioning her to a chair opposite his desk, 'yet I would gladly have avoided

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an interview which can only result in pain to both of us. Please state, as briefly as you can, the facts which you wish me to know.'

'I will not be longer than I can help, but I must tell you the story almost as it was told to me, and I must tell you the kind of man from whom I heard it.'

And then, deliberately and clearly, she described the surgeon's groom, his dismissal, and his departing boast about Sir Everard. She told Morton how her curiosity had been roused by this mention of Sir Everard's name, she already believing him to be the murderer, and how she had met the man later and got from him the whole story of his suspicions. She grew more energetic as she proceeded with her statement. Her eyes fired, her cheek glowed with suppressed passion. She expected to find a responsive warmth in Morton Blake; but to her surprise and mortification she found him cold as ice.

'Do you believe this story?' he asked.

'Why should I not? It agrees with my own suspicions. I have never forgotten what I was told by a person who was present at my father's trial. He described the counsel's cross-examination of Sir

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Everard, and how he looked when those questions were asked.'

This story of the lost spur tallied curiously with Shafto Jebb's assertion that the man who killed Walter Blake was on horseback, and had jumped the hedge after the murder. But, in spite of this correspondence between the two stories, Morton affected to laugh the groom's statement to scorn.

'Who is to believe a drunkard and a thief against a gentleman of Sir Everard's position? If the fellow had been an honest man he would have come forward at the inquest and told his story.'

'The man's character is bad enough, but that cannot alter the fact. I believe he has told the truth, and he is prepared to make his statement before a magistrate if——' Mrs. Barnard hesitated a little, feeling that she was about to weaken her case—'if he is paid for his trouble.'

'Yes, of course, the fellow has trumped up this story in order to trade upon it. He knew who you were—knew that you were inclined to suspect Sir Everard, and he has invented this story to get money out of you. I wonder you could be so easily gulled.'

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'You are mistaken, Mr. Blake. He did not know who I was until he had hinted at the knowledge of Sir Everard's secret. I told him my name then, to convince him that I was in earnest. But you can help me if you like. You must help me. This time I will take no denial. It is your duty, as your father's son, to sift this story. I want you to see and hear this man, and judge for yourself.'

'How and when am I to do that?' asked Morton reluctantly. He was horrified at this new revelation, worthless as he affected to consider it.

'Now—immediately. Yes,' said Mrs. Barnard, glancing at the clock on the chimney-piece, 'it is five minutes to three, and I told him to meet me on the common in front of your gates at three o'clock. Will you come with me to meet him?'

Morton took up his hat and went out with her through a French window opening into the garden. They went across the lawn and out at a wicket gate. There lay the common before them, a wide breezy expanse, with nothing higher than a furze bush to obscure the view.

There were some cows feeding, jingling their bells

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as they moved slowly over the short turf; there were some village children in the distance playing on the edge of a gravel pit; but of Tinker, the groom, there was no trace.

'You won't mind waiting a few minutes, will you, Mr. Blake?' Jane Barnard asked piteously.

'I don't mind waiting an hour. Having once consented to see the fellow, I am prepared for anything: but it looks very much as if he were not coming.'

Mrs. Barnard made no answer. She looked across the open landscape, where there was no sign of any approaching figure, which even delusive hope might mistake for Tinker. Could he mean to play her false? Surely not, when he had so much to gain by aiding her projects. Rigid punctuality was hardly to be expected from a man of his class, unprovided with any timekeeper in the shape of a watch.

Morton walked slowly up and down the turf in front of the sunk fence which divided the Manor House grounds from the common. He walked to and fro, busy with his own thoughts, and taking very little notice of Jane Barnard, who sat upon a

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hillock, watching the road that led from Austhorpe to the gates of Tangley Manor. In this silent way, each full of care and thought, they waited for an hour.

'Four o'clock,' said Morton, looking at his watch. 'I think I have given your witness a fair chance. You have evidently been fooled by a rogue, who played upon your feelings. I am sorry for you, because I believe you are honest in your assertion of your father's innocence—but I can do nothing to help you—and I must beg that you will not make any further appeal to me. You would only worry me without doing yourself any good.'

'He must have been bribed to keep away, exclaimed Mrs. Barnard, almost frantic with disappointment and mortification. 'He must have gone to Sir Everard after he left me last night, and sold his evidence to a higher bidder. Yet after what he told me of Sir Everard's treatment of him, that seems incredible.'

'One thing is very clear,' said Morton. 'He has cheated you. Good morning.'

He turned on his heel and left her, to go back to

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Austhorpe, cruelly disappointed. She had believed herself on the threshold of success. And now she seemed as far away from her end as ever; and she began to think that she must once more resign herself to the knowledge that she had failed in her mission, and go quietly home again by the ship in which she had intended to sail, until last night's revelation had altered all her ideas.

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CHAPTER III.

DRIFTING APART.

LIFE at Fairview was going on in the old, quiet way. Sir Everard had made but little change in his habits since his return from Algiers. The only difference was that he lived more alone, and spent much of the time that of old he had given to his daughter in the seclusion of his own study. Dulcie felt the change, but she offered no protest against it. She and her father seemed to have drifted imperceptibly from the old, happy, familiar companionship into reserve and strangeness. He no longer spent the idle hour or so before dinner lounging in one of Dulcie's comfortable arm-chairs while she played to him; and Chopin's mournful melodies seemed sadder than ever now that Dulcie sat alone at her piano.

Of the gradual decay in Sir Everard's health and strength there could be no question. He had the air of a man whose days are numbered, and who knows

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that the number thereof is small. It might be a question of months, or even years; but that idea of an indefinite lease of life which a man has while his limbs retain their vigour, and his heart beats sound and strong, was at an end for ever. He had been to London since his return, to see the famous doctor who, last December, had pronounced, with delicate ambiguity, that oracular sentence which the patient knew to mean his death warrant: and the physician had instructed him in the art of spinning an attenuated thread to the fag end. But this process of spinning out the thread was a weary one, and Sir Everard's soul revolted against it, even although he obeyed.

He was to live quietly, to court repose, perfect tranquility of mind and body, above all other earthly blessings, since in that lay his sole chance of prolonging his life.

'I have led a secluded life for the last twelve years,' said Sir Everard, 'with no amusements or excitements of any kind. I have lived alone, with my books and my daughter.'

The physician looked at him with an incredulous

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smile, as who would say, 'Why will my patients persist in lying to me, when it is so easy for me to find them out?'

'You tell me so,' he said gravely, 'and I cannot gainsay you; but your heart tells of violent agitations—of an organization worn out by passionate emotion and mental pain.'

Dulcie might have drooped and died from sheer loneliness and melancholy in those days, had it not been for Lady Frances Grange and her brother. Frances having once put her hand to the plough was not the kind of young woman to let go until she had made her furrow. Having promised Sir Everard to be a friend and a sister to Dulcie she was resolutely bent upon keeping her word. She came to Fairview two or three times a week, and she insisted upon Dulcie driving her ponies to Blatchmardean almost as often. Thus the two girls rarely spent the day apart, and this companionship absorbed the greater part of Dulcie's leisure, since her mornings were chiefly devoted to visiting among the poor, and teaching in the school. Of late she had given herself up to this work with a perseverance and self-abnegation

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which she had scarcely shown in happier days, tender and affectionate as she had ever been in her care for the poor and the suffering. But now that all the hope and gladness had gone from her own life, the cares and joys of others were the chief occupation of her mind. She shrank from all thoughts that turned inward. She was glad to be busy about other people's business. Those long mornings at her easel or her piano, which had once been so sweet to her, would now have been full of pain, since they would have given her leisure for thought.

Had she been left to herself in the time of her first great sorrow she would hardly have made so noble a stand against the selfish grief which broods and despairs: but she was urged to action and sustained in her course by a new friend who had a strong influence upon her mind. This was Mr. Haldimond, who, from the hour he first saw her face, had determined to rescue her from the slough of despond into which she was falling, to make life bright and pleasant to her once again. Not for a moment did he give her reason to suspect that he knew her story, or that he was going out of his way to console her. He

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appealed to her in the cause of others; he sought to interest her in the sorrows of others; he made her believe that he wanted her help among his poor and could not get on without it; and she responded nobly to his call. If he saw any sign of flagging, any willingness to fall back upon her lonely days at Fairview, he was at her side to stimulate her to exertion. She walked and drove many a mile in the course of her charitable visits, and the pretty roan ponies were known far afield in distant cottages on the remotest edge of the sparsely-populated parish. Sometimes she was inclined to doubt her power to do good, except in the substantial form of benevolence which ministered to the bodily wants of the poor; but when she hinted at her incapacity, and expressed her fears to Arthur Haldimond, he gave her such warm assurance that she was fain to believe him.

'You think because you cannot preach and dogmatize to these poor creatures that you are doing no good,' he said. 'That is a great mistake. You influence them for good in a world of ways. Your bright face, your innocence of all evil, your gentleness of manner, all these have a purifying, elevating

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effect, which poor people feel without being conscious of it. They would not utter a coarse, unholy word in your presence on any account; and gradually, if they see you often, they will leave off coarse, bad language altogether. They would not like to be rough with their children before you, who are so gentle; and by degrees the habit of gentleness will grow upon them. The education of imitation goes on all through life; and what is to become of those poor creatures who never see anything beautiful or gracious that they can imitate? Believe me, dear Miss Courtenay, your trouble is not thrown away. In several cottages where you have been I have seen a new brightness in the furniture, flower-pots in the windows, a nosegay on the table, as if things had been smartened up to do you honour—and if you leave a palpable trace of this kind, be assured you leave some trace of your goodness in the hearts of those you talk with. Why, the fact that these people love you and are anxious for your visits, ought in itself to be a sufficient reward.'

'Yes,' faltered Dulcie, looking ashamed of herself, 'I am very ungrateful. I do love them all, poor

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things, and it is very nice to know they are glad to see me.'

Mr. Haldimond came to Fairview as often as the many duties of his parish would allow him, and he was one of the few people whose society Sir Everard enjoyed. The curate was a scholar, a man of wide culture; and scholars were rare within a ten-mile radius of Austhorpe, in which rural district men gave their minds chiefly to sport and agriculture, and thought they knew all that life could teach them when they had learnt how to choose a horse, and were acquainted with the elements of farriery. Mr. Haldimond was made welcome at Fairview. He dropped in whenever he liked; and it seemed to Dulcie that her father was always happier and more at his ease with her when Mr. Haldimond was present than when he and she were alone. If the curate came in at tea-time Sir Everard would join him in the morning-room, where Mr. Haldimond unconsciously had appropriated to himself Morton's particular chair. He was a desperate tea-drinker, and had almost lived upon tea and bread and butter during his busy life in Whitechapel.

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'My dinner was always a movable feast,' he said gaily, 'and there were days when I forgot to dine. But at whatever hour I came in my housekeeper always brought me a pot of strong tea, and a plate of substantial bread and butter; and you have no idea how well I throve upon that school-girl diet. I had no such luxuries as you give me, Miss Courtenay, none of these daintinesses in the way of cake and toast. I am afraid you and Austhorpe are spoiling me for the battle of life.'

'You seem to work very hard at Austhorpe,' said Dulcie, 'though you came here to rest.'

'I could not live without work of some kind; but here I only play at working. You have no idea what work means in a London back-slum—or of the despair that creeps into a man's mind when he finds himself in the middle of a world where everything is wrong, and feels his incapability of setting it right.'

'But I dare say you did a great deal of good?' said Dulcie.

'I did what I could. I rolled the big stone a little way up the hill. I filled a few of the bottomless buckets. I cleansed one little corner of the

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Augean stable, and I dare say by this time that particular corner is just as dirty as all the rest. Yes, Miss Courtenay, it is disheartening work. You, who live among green fields, where something of the freshness and simplicity of nature still remains in the hearts of men, can hardly imagine the horror of London poverty.'

Everybody at Austhorpe liked Mr. Haldimond. His cheerful, energetic, active temperament contrasted delightfully with the languid graces of Mr. Mawk, who, finding that he would not be allowed to carry out his own particular ritual in all its fulness, had contented himself with a very sleepy performance of his duties, reserving all the forces of his intellect for future exercise in a more congenial sphere. The parish had thus been in a great manner left to take care of itself, and it awakened to new life under Mr. Haldimond's vigorous administration.

Dulcie was very glad that Sir Everard should make a friend of the new curate—indeed, he of all men was the friend she would have chosen for her father; for she had a strong belief in his goodness, his wide sympathy with all human sorrow.

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Not once had the father and daughter talked confidentially together since their home-coming. Each seemed carefully to avoid unreserved conversation. When they talked together it was always of indifferent matters, of art, or literature, or the events of the day. Of their own lives, their own feelings, neither spoke.

One day Sir Everard told Dulcie that he meant to take her to Egypt in the late autumn.

'My doctor says Egypt will suit me,' he said, 'and I dare say you will like to go there.'

'Very much. I have always wished to see Egypt.'

'I am glad of that. And in the meantime, now that you have an agreeable friend in Lady Frances, I suppose you will not mind staying at Fairview.'

'No, papa, I am quite content to be at Fairview.'

This was true, for although Dulcie had felt at first that it would be intensely painful for her to be in the neighbourhood of her discarded lover, that the knowledge that he was near her, the dread of meeting him would make life a burden, she had gradually grown accustomed to the idea that all was ended between them, and had begun to think of her engagement as a thing of the past. It seemed so long ago since she

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had been utterly happy in the gladness of a girlhood that had lacked no blessing which earth can give. She thought of herself and her bygone happiness as if she had been thinking of another person. She thought of the Morton Blake whom she had known and loved as some one who had passed from this earth altogether. A Morton Blake remained, but not the one who had loved her. She fancied she could meet him and speak to him as to a stranger, almost without a pang; so completely had she resigned herself to the idea that their parting was irrevocable, that under no circumstances could they ever renew the broken tie.

She met Dora Blake one day in the village, and paused shyly, blushing crimson, and afraid to speak. But Miss Blake took both her hands, and held them lovingly, looking at her with unaltered affection.

'Why, Dulcie, were you going to pass me by?' she exclaimed.

'I did not know what to do,' faltered Dulcie, with tears in her eyes. 'I thought you might be angry with me.'

'Angry with you? No, sweet love. Whatever might happen I should never blame you. I know my

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Dulcie's lovely character too well. I am sorry, dear, very sorry, that things should have fallen out as they have, but I cannot blame you for obeying your father.'

Not one harsh word about Sir Everard. Dulcie felt unspeakably grateful.

'Dear Miss Blake, you are always good. You are able to pity and understand every one. I hope Tiny and Horatia are not very angry with me.'

'Tiny is apt to be a little unreasonable,' said Miss Blake, 'and Horatia has rather a hard way of looking at things. But they were always fond of you, dear, and I think what they feel most is being deprived of your society. I should like to come and see you, love, but I feel that it is better for me to stay away. Your father might think that I was trying to bring you and Morton together again. In any case I do not think he would care to see me at Fairview.'

Dulcie felt in her heart that Miss Blake was right.

'It is a sad loss for me,' she said. 'There is no one—after my father—that I love better than you. I am ever so much happier now I know you have not turned against me.'

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Dulcie went home with her heart considerably lightened, and played lawn tennis with Frances Grange, Lord Beville and Mr. Haldimond, with something of her old gaiety. The sunk lawn below the terrace at Fairview was admirably adapted for tennis, and Frances had insisted upon two afternoons a week being set apart for the game. She told Mr. Haldimond that if he chose to play he would be welcome, though he was such a tremendous swell that he made the whole contest ridiculously one-sided; and if he didn't choose to join them they must find some obliging nonentity to make a fourth; but it happened somehow that Mr. Haldimond could always find time for a game of tennis at Fairview, and a cup of tea afterwards; sometimes in the morning room, sometimes in a delightful little circular tent which Frances had persuaded Dulcie to set up between two great cedars on the upper lawn.

On this particular afternoon, when Dulcie had been cheered by her meeting with Miss Blake, the curate was delighted at the new brightness of her face. He had been watching and waiting for the

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lifting of the cloud that veiled her beauty; and now he fancied the shadow was passing away, and that he should see her as Mrs. Aspinall had described her to him, in the radiance of her joyous girlhood.

'She is beginning to forget Morton Blake,' he thought. 'I wish the man were a thousand leagues away, instead of being at her door.'

Beville was devoted in his attentions, following Dulcie like her shadow; but, alas for the young man's hopes, she accepted his devotion as carelessly as if he had been some affectionate Newfoundland or impressionable collie, frisking and leaping about her. She took his complimentary speeches as so many tremendous jokes, laughing at them heartily, and she treated him as cordially as if he had been her brother.

'It's no use, Fan,' he told his sister despairingly, when that young lady tried to inspire him by assuring him of Sir Everard's approval. 'What's the good of the father being friendly to me if the daughter doesn't care a straw for me? And I know she doesn't. That parson fellow has as good a chance as I.'

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The words had an ominous sound to Frances Grange's ear. What if the curate had a better chance than Beville? What if he were about the most dangerous rival who could have appeared upon the field? He was handsome, of noble presence, a thorough gentleman, cultured, widely read, travelled, interesting in every way; and Fanny knew that he was deeply interested in Dulcie.

'He must be got out of the way somehow,' she said to herself, 'or Beville will not have the ghost of a chance. I must warn Sir Everard of the danger.'

She took an early opportunity of being alone with the baronet for a few minutes on the terrace while the others were loitering on the tennis lawn.

'Dear Sir Everard,' she began, sidling up to him in her pretty, coquettish way, being perfectly at ease with him by this time, and having a lurking idea that he liked her and thought all her ways charming, 'I am going to take a most awful liberty. I hope you won't be too dreadfully angry.'

'I don't think it is in my power to be angry with you; unless you were to desert poor Dulcie and turn your back upon Fairview.'

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'*Pas de danger*,' said Fanny, with a smile and a sigh. 'I am too happy here. But I have been thinking—oh, please don't be cross—I have been thinking that if you really would like Dulcie to marry Beville you are hardly wise in encouraging such an attractive person as Mr. Haldimond to make himself at home here. Please don't fly out at me!'

Sir Everard showed no disposition to any savage outburst, nor did he seem half so much surprised and concerned as Lady Frances expected him to be. He only looked gravely meditative, and he answered her in his gentlest tone.

'I should like Dulcie to marry Beville,' he said, 'for I believe he is a good, true-hearted young fellow, and that he would make her happy. I am still worldly-minded enough to wish that my daughter should be Countess of Blatchmardean, and that her inheritance should help to restore the fortunes of a noble family. But if to be your brother's wife now, and a countess by-and-by, be not her surest road to happiness, I will forego my own scheme, pleasant as it is to me. I want her to be happy. I want to see the old brightness come back to her face before I

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die. I want to be sure that she has a faithful protector, a shield and defence against all earthly troubles. If I am not to see her happy in my way I should like to see her happy in hers: and if she would rather be a country parson's wife than an embryo countess, I must bow to fate.'

'You were not so indulgent about Morton,' said Frances, with a touch of vexation.

She was so grieved on Beville's account that she could not refrain from inflicting this little stab.

Sir Everard gave her a darker glance than she had ever had from him.

'I think I told you some time ago that I had my own reasons for my conduct in that matter, and that I did not care to be questioned about them,' he said coldly, and poor Frances felt that her zeal had carried her too far.

The fact was that Sir Everard was better aware than anybody else of Arthur Haldimond's growing influence upon his daughter's life. He saw that Haldimond was doing that which he the father felt himself powerless to do. He was diverting Dulcie's mind from her sorrow; he was giving her that active

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share in the life and cares of others which is the best distraction for a troubled mind. And if a warmer feeling should grow out of this interest, if the adviser and friend should ripen into the lover, Sir Everard was prepared to accept the result, and to be thankful.

'I only want her to be happy,' he said to himself. 'I have destroyed her first hopes; I have blighted her girlhood. Would to God that I might see her secure of a happy womanhood before I go.'

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CHAPTER IV.

THE END OF ALL THINGS.

Mr. Jebb's cold became much worse after Tinker's dismissal. He had been guilty of extreme imprudence on the night which followed that domestic revolution. Summoned suddenly by one of his distant patients, he had gone out on foot, and had stayed out till after midnight, much to the discomfiture and alarm of his devoted wife. The natural consequence of this disregard of self showed itself in a violent influenza, which kept Mr. Jebb confined to his bed for two days, half-smothered under a mountain of blankets, with his head swathed in flannel—and his patients left to their fate.

This self-devotion of Mr. Jebb, in going forth from his fireside at the call of duty, after having made up his mind to stay at home and nurse himself, was a new development of character which sorely puzzled Jane Barnard.

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During her residence under the parish doctor's roof she had seen quite enough of him to know that unselfishness was not his dominant quality. He was fairly good-natured, in an easy-going, self-indulgent way, but self was assuredly the central figure in his own particular plan of the universe, and nothing seemed less likely than that he should peril his own health by a muddy walk of four or five miles out and home, in order to give the solace of his skill to an unimportant patient.

The more deeply Mrs. Barnard considered the matter the more did she incline to connect Mr. Jebb's absence from the domestic hearth with the mysterious disappearance of Tinker. She had made inquiries at the 'Three Sugar-Loaves,' and had there learnt that Tinker had knocked up the house at a quarter past eleven, and had asked for a night's lodging; that he was obviously the worse for liquor, and had therefore been refused such accommodation, whereat he had resorted to language of a particularly savage and blasphemous character, and had gone his way. From that hour no one belonging to the 'Sugar-Loaves' had seen him.

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Where had he been, and what had he been doing with himself between half-past nine and a quarter past eleven? It was not likely that he would return to his hay-stack, having the means of procuring himself a supper and a night's lodging. One of two things must have happened. Either the conversation in the lane had been overheard by some one, and the groom had been bribed to give Mrs. Barnard the slip; or the man had changed his mind, deeming the promised reward too small or too uncertain to compensate him for the risk he must run in trying to earn it. In any case it was clear that Tinker had gone; and it seemed more than likely that he meant to hold no further communication with Mrs. Barnard.

While this disappointment was still fresh in her mind her thoughts were suddenly turned into a new direction by a letter from the governor of the prison where her father was confined. She had contrived to see this gentleman at the time of Vargas's removal from Highclere jail to the convict settlement, and her story, told with an intense earnestness, rare in women of her class, had interested him deeply. He had promised to do all in

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his power to alleviate her father's position, and to bring him into a right way of thinking.

'Your father's health has been failing for some time,' he said, 'and for the last three weeks he has been in the infirmary. He is not suffering from any painful or incurable disease. His malady is the wearing out of the machine, the natural result of a life of hardship and deprivation. If you would like to see him again, and I know you would, it would be well to come at once. The doctor tells me that in cases of this kind it is very difficult to calculate how long a patient may last. He may linger for weeks, or months, or may expire suddenly, going out like the flame of a candle. In this case the decay seems rapid.'

The ship by which Jane Barnard was to have sailed had already gone, all her plans having been altered by Tinker's revelation; and Mrs. Jebb was congratulating herself upon her good fortune in keeping so excellent a servant; and now Jane told her mistress that she must have three days' leave of absence, or possibly might be obliged to remain away still longer.

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'Indeed, ma'am, I think you'd better suit yourself, as quick as you can,' she said. 'I can be no more good to you. I have to go to see a sick relative, and if he dies I must go to my home in America. So I don't see the use of my coming back here, except to fetch my luggage.'

Mrs. Jebb sighed, and assented.

'But I don't expect ever to have any one I shall like as well as I do you, Jane,' she said piteously.

Mrs. Barnard packed her box, and left the Homestead early on a bright June morning, so early that she had a full hour on her hands before the omnibus left Austhorpe to convey railway travellers to the station at Highclere. This surplus hour she meant to employ in going to Tangley Manor. Mr. Blake had distinctly told her that she was to make no further appeal to him; but to a person of Jane's persevering temper this counted for nothing. She was determined that, if it were any way possible, Morton Blake should see her father before he died.

It was only eight o'clock when she presented herself at the Manor House; but Morton was an early riser, and had already made the round of his garden

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and stables, and was strolling on the lawn before the house. He recognised the intruder as she came along the carriage drive, and he went across the grass to speak to her.

'You have come again,' he said, 'in spite of what I told you the other day.'

'Yes, sir, because something has happened which makes it my duty to trouble you. Please read that letter, sir.'

She gave him the governor's letter, and waited in silence while he read it.

'Are you going to your father?'

'Yes, sir. I am going from here to Austhorpe Lane, where I shall meet the omnibus for Highclere.'

'And you are going from Highclere to London, and from London to Portland?'

'Yes. I shall not get to Portland until late in the evening; too late to see my poor father, I'm afraid. I shall have to wait till to-morrow morning for that.'

'And what do you want me to do?'

'Oh, sir, cannot you guess what I want? I

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want you to see my father before he dies. I want you to hear his story from his own lips; for then, strange and unlikely as it all seems, I don't think you will refuse to believe him. Think, Mr. Blake, it is not a very great sacrifice that I ask from you. It will only cost you two days of your life, and it may put the whole story of the past in a new light.'

'You are an importunate woman,' said Morton, 'but I believe you are an honest woman.'

'Will you go to Portland, sir?'

'Yes,' answered Morton, after some moments' thought, 'I will.'

'At once. Without much delay, at any rate? You see what the doctor says.'

'I will go to town by the night mail, and will go to Portland by the first train to-morrow morning.'

Jane Barnard thanked him warmly, earnestly, and in the fewest possible words, and then she went across the sunny common, above which the skylarks were carolling joyously, to Austhorpe Lane, and waited till the queer, stunted-looking omnibus, which seemed to belong to a particular breed maintained for such work, came grinding along in a cloud of

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dust, and took her place in the musty interior, where there were only two other passengers. She had no incumbrance but her handbag; and thus lightly burdened she set forth on her lonely journey, gladdened by the thought of Morton's promise. He was the kind of man whom nobody would ever think of doubting. His word, once given, was an all-sufficient security.

* * * * *

At two o'clock on the following day Jane Barnard and Morton Blake were both seated in one of the well-ventilated, spotlessly-clean cells of the Infirmary at Portland, the fresh sea air blowing in through an open window near the ceiling, the sunbeams dancing on the whitewashed wall, and Humphrey Vargas lying on his narrow bed, weaker than a new-born infant, and as near the unknown darkness that girdles life round as the babe that has just been called into the light.

He was dying. The last threads in the strand were fast ravelling out. Quietly, painlessly, and in full possession of his senses to the last, the narrow span of his days was wearing swiftly to the close.

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Jane sat beside his bed, with the horny, toil-furrowed hand clasped close in hers, loving him in that last hour almost as well as she had loved him thirty years ago, when she was a little girl and gambolled on his knee, and could not believe that there was a fault in daddy. Infinite pity grew into infinite love in these last hours of the sinner's life.

'Mr. Blake has come all this way to hear the truth from your own lips,' she said gently. 'You'll tell him everything, won't you, father dear? Tell him why you confessed to a crime that you hadn't done—why you told a lie to make yourself blacker than you were.'

'I'd been that drove and werrited,' said Vargas, fixing his glazing eye on Morton, with a look that had all the awfulness of death in it, mingled with a raven-like cunning, which was grotesquely suggestive of Barnaby's famous bird. 'It was constables here and magistrates there, till there wasn't one blooming corner of this blooming earth where a poor bloke could smoke his pipe in peace. Sometimes it was the casual ward, and sometimes it was the lee side of a hay-stack, and sometimes it was the jail, and the

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jail was a deal cleaner and comfortabler than the pauper's refuge. Wot had I got to lose, d'ye think? Nothink. What had I got to gain? Everythink. If I'd confessed only to cleaning out a dead man's pockets, society would ha' made nothink of me. He's a common kind of hevery day criminal, he is—folks 'ud a' said. Let him bide. But society's allus interested in a murderer, and the colder bloodeder he doos it the more society vallys him. I thinks as I sat under the hedge—hard by where Muster Blake lay—that blooming October night, as it wouldn't be a bad inwestment for the fag end of a pauper's life. A lot o' old tabbies would come and sing psalms over me, and tell me the bigger sinner I was, the more sure and sarten to go to glory if I took kindly to their tracks, and sung their hymns loud enough. And I thought as how they'd never hang me, an old un like me, for a murder done twenty year ago; and if they didn't hang me I thought they'd make much of me as a interestin' subjick for tracks and hymns, a victim to a guilty conscience, and a shinin' example to hardened sinners.'

'Are you telling the truth?' asked Morton, who

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had never removed his eyes from the dying man's face during this statement.

'Why should I tell you a lie?' de manded Vargas with a ghastly grin. 'I've nothin' to gain by lies now. I've told precious many, but now I'm slidin' down into a pit that none o' you can pick me out of, I may as well indulge myself with the luxury of truth. I didn't kill Muster Blake. I never lifted a hand against him. I can look in your face, you being his son, and say that with a clear conscience; and it ain't in many things my conscience is clear, is it, Jane, my girl? It ain't clear of being a bad father, and a bad husband, and a drunken blackguard; but it's clear of shedding a fellow-creature's blood. When I came along Austhorpe Lane that night at dusk, hard by the pollarded oak, I sees somethink lying in the ditch, and I goes down on my marrow-bones to see what it is. It was a gentleman in a red coat, lying face downward in the mud, dead as a door-nail. I turned him over gently. And I laid my hand upon his heart, and I made certain sure that the life was out of him, and that there was nothing I could do to bring it back. And then,

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without no malice again him, I took his watch and chain, and emptied his pockets. His property was no use to him any more, poor bloke: and Lord knows I wanted it bad enough.'

'Where had you been all day?'

'Hangin' about the lanes and woods, pretty much as I told Sir Everard. Only that part about seein' Mr. Blake ride by, and goin' up to him, and taking hold of his bridle—that was all lies.'

'A man who lies once will lie twice,' said Morton. 'I don't know what to believe.'

The dying man's utter godlessness, his disregard of all the virtues, from his boyhood upwards, made his testimony of so little worth. A man who would swear anything, doubtless, to serve any purpose. Yet here, and now, with the grave so near, what object could he have to serve? What gain or comfort could he get by lying?

'Do you know and believe that you have an immortal soul?' asked Morton earnestly, 'that after you have cast off the worn-out husk of life, you must answer in another world for the deeds you have done in this?'

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'That's what the chaplain has taught me,' answered Vargas meekly. 'He's a heddicated man and he ought to know.'

'But do you believe in a world to come?'

'Yes. I believe that this world could never be so rough on a poor varmint like me if there wasn't somethink better somewheres else to make things square for us.'

This was a self-interested way of considering the subject, but the man seemed sincere.

'And knowing that you are on the brink of the grave, do you declare that you did not kill my father?'

'I do.'

'Do you know who did?'

'No.'

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CHAPTER V.

'THAT WOULD BE AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE.'

It was midsummer, and the lanes and woods round Austhorpe were in their flush of summer beauty, the freshness still upon the green, the glory and colour of the hedgerows at their brightest. Honeysuckles hung their sweet blossom above the ferns on every bank, and all the little homely wild flowers, dear to cottage children, dappled the grass with indescribable varieties of colour. Here spread a purple clover field; there the white blossoms of a bean field shed their delicate perfume on the warm air. Tangley Common was a blaze of golden bloom, and Tangley Wood a deep, dark land of shadow, pleasant to rest in, after the vivid world outside.

Here Dulcie came often, sometimes with Frances Grange, sometimes alone. Near though the wood was to the Manor House she had never yet encountered Morton or his sisters, or even Lizzie Hardman. She knew their habits, and that they rarely left the Manor

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House gardens except to ride or drive or go to church. Idle meandering in the wood had no charm for either of the sisters. Horatia was too practical and business-like, Tiny too lazy. And Morton, the ambitious, hard-working Morton, was of all men the least inclined to waste his time in dreamy ramblings under beechen boughs.

Dulcie had seen Lucy Green several times since their first meeting. She had found the poor, sickly mother sitting on her favourite bank, sometimes struggling with a little bit of needlework, while her children sported about among the fern, as happy and careless of the future as young fawns, or frisky little rabbits. But now that the shelter of the beech boughs had grown darker and thicker—now that the fierce midsummer sun could hardly penetrate the dense roof of foliage, poor Lucy was fain to stay at home, waiting for that last melancholy journey which should carry her to her quiet rest in Austhorpe churchyard. The end was very near. The patient was not buoyed up by those delusive hopes which cheer the last days of some consumptive sufferers. She knew that her mother and sister had both been victims to

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the same disease, and she was prepared to die as they had died.

Her husband had been over from Avonmore to see her more than once, and had shown himself deeply moved at the prospect of their last parting. He was not altogether heartless, and even in his selfishness clung with a feeble fondness to the wife he had once loved, who had once been bright and gay, and worthy of a husband's pride.

'We should have got on beautifully together if we had been able to keep the wolf from the door, shouldn't we, Luce?' he asked, as if in apology for his failure in the domestic character. 'But when poverty is always staring one in the face, it's deuced hard to be a model husband and father.'

'I have had my faults as a wife, Charley dear,' said the invalid meekly. 'I don't pretend to have been perfect.'

'Well, perhaps you've been over anxious, and you've nagged and worried a fellow a trifle more than was needful. But let bygones be bygones. I was always fond of you, Luce. I hope you know that?'

'I like to believe it, Charley,' sighed the wife,

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clasping his hand in her wasted fingers. 'You won't neglect the children when I'm gone, will you, dear?'

'Neglect them!' cried Green, as if he had always been the most devoted parent, 'why, what else shall I have to live for?'

'But when you are running about to concerts, to hear new singers——'

'My dear, that is a matter of business. I must attend to my profession.'

'Ah, Charley dear, I wouldn't mind that, if the profession would keep you and the children.'

'Well, dearest, perhaps I have been a little volatile. But I am sobering down, Luce. I have been deuced lonely and low-spirited since you left home. The place was never anything but a hole at the best; but it seemed ten times drearier when you were gone. Though you used to nag and whimper abominably, now and again, my pet—you know you did.'

'I couldn't help saying what was in my mind, Churchill.'

'Don't call me Churchill, lovey, or I shall think you are angry with me.'

'No, Charley dear, I am not angry, I am only

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anxious about the children. They are so young, and you are such a young man to be left with such responsibility. Miss Blake has promised to keep Mattie at the school here; she's getting on so nicely, and she's so bright, and it would be a pity for her to go back to Avonmore, where the air doesn't suit her half so well, and where she'd have to muddle away her time looking after the little ones. She's to board with the schoolmistress, and to help her a little in keeping things straight and tidy; and in a year or two she'll be a pupil-teacher, Miss Blake says; and later on Miss Blake will get her a place somewhere as a nursery governess.'

'Genteel drudgery!' said Mr. Green contemptuously.

'Well, of course, dear, she'll have to work for her living; but we must all do that in some way or other.'

Mr. Green sighed, assenting to one of the hardest truths in nature. He had an honest abhorrence of work and regimen of all kinds. He sometimes thought that he ought to have been created a butterfly, without having been obliged to endure the laborious preliminary stages of caterpillar and chrysalis.

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He came and went almost as lightly as that picturesque insect.

As Mrs. Green grew worse, and the end was obviously approaching, Dulcie's visits to the cottage became more frequent. Lucy had attached herself to her mistress's daughter with an almost romantic warmth of feeling. A visit from Dulcie brightened her when her spirits were at the lowest ebb; and Dulcie, seeing the cheering effect of her presence, could not refuse to come. Here too, on neutral ground, she sometimes met Aunt Dora, and this was an extra inducement. They could talk in Lucy's sick room as freely as if they had been alone, and Dulcie was made happy by discovering anew on each occasion that she had lost nothing of Miss Blake's affection.

One brilliant day at the end of June, a day of surpassing brightness and beauty, when the mere idea of dry-as-dust business or work of any kind seemed an insult to common sense, Dulcie went with a basket of magnificent cherries, and a few choice roses, to spend an afternoon with the invalid. She had a volume of Tennyson in her pocket, for it

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was one of Lucy's delights to hear poetry, and Dulcie took pleasure in reading to her.

Mattie, the eldest girl, had been withdrawn from school to assist in nursing her mother, as the little servant had her hands full in attending to the smaller children, and doing the house work. When Dulcie opened the cottage door all was silent below stairs. She peeped into the kitchen and through the open window, and saw the servant hanging out linen to dry at the bottom of the garden. And then she went lightly up the steep, narrow stair, and was just going to open the door of the sick room when the sound of a voice within set her heart beating violently.

Morton's voice, and no other, could have so moved her.

She drew back, and was going downstairs again, when Mattie came out of the children's bedroom, which was just behind the mother's room.

'Oh, if you please, Miss, Mr. Blake is with mother. Will you come into our room, if you don't want to see him?' said Mattie, who was a precocious child, and knew all about Dulcie's broken engagement.

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'I think I'd better go away,' faltered Dulcie, handing the girl her basket; 'please give your mother these flowers and cherries, with my love. I'll come another day.'

She was turning to run downstairs, but Mattie caught hold of her gown.

'Oh, pray, pray don't go, Miss,' she exclaimed, her eyes filling with tears, 'mother will be so disappointed. She loves to see you—and she says she has so few days left now——'

That argument was irresistible: Dulcie stayed.

'Mr. Blake has been with mother a good time already, and I don't suppose he'll be very much longer,' explained Mattie; 'if you don't mind coming into our room, Miss, and sitting down, he needn't see you at all.'

The one sitting-room downstairs was the only way to the front door. Through this Morton must inevitably pass when he left the house. Dulcie therefore gladly consented to wait in the children's room.

'It's quite tidy, please, Miss,' Mattie said with a deprecating air.

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The room was the pink of neatness, brightened and smartened by various small efforts at artistic decoration on the part of Mattie and the servant. Coloured prints from the illustrated papers had been pasted on the whitewashed wall, a few little bits of cheap crockery adorned the mantelshelf and chest of drawers. The bed linen was as white as snow. The muslin window curtain looked as if it had been put up fresh that morning, and on the broad sill of the old-fashioned casement stood a large mug of stocks and carnations which filled the room with their perfume. Altogether Mattie's bedroom was a chamber in which the proudest lady of the land might be content to sit for a little while—perchance to meditate upon the homely graces of humble life. Dulcie turned to compliment the little girl upon the tidiness of her room, but found that Mattie had gone.

There was a door between the children's room and that of the invalid, and it had been left half open in order that the sweet summer air might circulate freely through the two rooms. In this wise every word spoken in Lucy's room was distinctly audible

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to Dulcie, and the very first sentence she heard riveted her to the spot, forgetful of every consideration except the desire to hear more.

'Why did you keep these facts from me when I came to you at Avonmore?' asked Morton.

'Because he had been good and generous to me, and I felt bound to shield him. But since I have been living here—through the long wakeful nights—that is one of the worst things in my illness, you know, sir, I get so little sleep—I have brooded and brooded, till my brain felt on fire; and it has been dreadful to be obliged to keep silence about it all. I felt that I must tell the truth to some one, whatever harm it might do. At one time I thought I would tell Mr. Haldimond, for as a minister I suppose he would be bound in honour not to tell again—but then it seemed as if you had the best right to know—and so—I made up my mind to tell you everything before I was taken away.'

She paused for a little to recover her strength, while Morton sat quietly waiting, with calm, intent eyes fixed upon her face.

'Promise me one thing, sir,' said Lucy earnestly.

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'Promise me that you will do nothing to bring sorrow upon Miss Courtenay!'

'How can I promise that? Do you think I would willingly bring sorrow upon her? Do you suppose it is of my own free will I am parted from her? She was dearer to me than my life. I shall always honour and love her. But that love cannot alter the fatal past. If her father killed mine——'

'He was deeply wronged. He loved his wife passionately—he was a slave to her. There is no sacrifice he would not have made for her. There never was such a husband, and she ought to have given him back love for love. I say that, although I was so fond of her. She was thoughtless, false, cruel —yes, though her natural disposition was all softness and sweetness—though she was kind and generous to every creature that came in her way, except her husband. To him she was harder than stone, and all because she was madly in love with your father.'

'Why did she not marry my father instead of Sir Everard?'

'Why, indeed! That sin lies at Lady George's

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door. God knows how hardly she used her daughter, and what wicked lies were told about Mr. Blake. Somehow or other Lady George contrived to make Miss Alice think that your father was in love with some one else, a young widow who had just settled in our part of the country, and who was riding to hounds and making a great dash. There's no doubt this Mrs. Mountjoy set her cap at Mr. Blake, and it was common talk that they were going to be married. Anyhow, Miss Alice believed what her mother told her. We had all gone to the South of France for Lady George's health, and Sir Everard had come after us, and Mr. Blake hadn't—for I believe Lord George and he had had words, and he wasn't allowed to visit at the house any more. And so Miss Alice gave way all at once, in a pet, and the marriage was patched up suddenly, and they were married at the Protestant Church at Cannes, and went off to Italy for the honeymoon. It was all done in a hurry. Lady George didn't give her daughter time to think what she was doing. I can see the little foreign church now, and the February sunlight shining on Miss Alice's lovely head, and I know I wondered to

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think how soon it was all done and over, and perhaps the peace and happiness of a lifetime thrown away for ever. And so it proved to be. God help them both, poor things.'

'When did Lady Courtenay see my father again?' said Morton.

'Not till she had been married many months, and we came to Fairview, after travelling about a great deal. Her spirits were very variable while we were going from place to place. Sometimes she was full of life and gaiety, and seemed delighted with everything she saw and everybody she met; and I think at such times Sir Everard was very happy. Then all of a sudden she drooped, and fretted in a secret way which I know troubled him dreadfully. She would spend hours alone in her room, crying as if her heart would break, and she would never tell him what it was that grieved her. She would confess to nothing except to being out of spirits. Then the sorrowful mood would pass away, and she would be all brightness and life again. And so things went on till we came back to England, and she began her quiet married life at Fairview.'

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'Did she seem happy then?' asked Morton.

'No, the coming home upset her terribly. I suppose it was the idea of being so near her old lover, and hearing people talk about him at every hand's turn. He and Sir Everard had been college friends, and were very much attached to each other. I don't believe Sir Everard knew at this time that Mr. Blake had been in love with Miss Alice. Lady George was such a clever manager, and things had been kept so close. Anyhow, Sir Everard invited his old friend to Fairview, and Mr. Blake used to come as often as he liked, and was always welcome. Many and many a time from the upstairs window, where I sat at my work, I have seen him and Lady Courtenay dawdling about the gardens, looking at the roses, and talking to each other, much the same as they used in the old days when she was Alice Rothney. And Sir Everard was so generous-minded and unsuspecting, and trusted his wife so thoroughly. I felt that it was all wrong—I felt as if we were all standing on the brink of a precipice—but what could I do?'

'You might have warned Lady Courtenay of her danger.'

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'I did one day venture to say a few words; but she was very angry, and told me I had forgotten my place. And then in her old impulsive way she put her arms round my neck and kissed me, and said it was she that was in the wrong, and she sobbed in my arms, poor darling, and said she was a miserable woman. Believe me, Mr. Blake, I did what I could, in my poor way, to hold her back from the gulf to which she was hurrying; but Fate was stronger than her will or mine—and it was only her sad, early death that saved her from ruin.'

'Did she and my father ever meet in secret?'

'Yes, sir, that was the worst of it. They met by accident at first, and then by appointment. Heaven knows how it was I found it all out, for nobody told me, but I had got to watch her closely at that time, full of fear for what was coming, and I knew as well as possible when she used to go out for one of her lonely walks that she was going to meet Mr. Blake. Before that time she had seldom walked beyond the grounds. When she went out it was to drive or ride, but now she had taken a fancy for walking alone, two or three times a week. Sometimes she would

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come home with a few wild flowers in her bosom, and I knew the country well enough to be able to guess from the flowers she wore where she had been. There was a flower that I had never seen anywhere but in Tangley Wood, a particularly large dark harebell, and I saw that she often brought home a little bunch of these. She would put them in one of the vases in her dressing-room, and be as careful of them as if all the hothouse flowers in the room were worthless in comparison. Once I lost patience with her somehow, and cried out in a sudden fit of passion, "Did *he* pick them?" and she was dreadfully angry, and asked me how I dared speak to her like that."

The sick woman stopped, sinking back upon her pillow, and smiled with a curiously bitter smile at some vivid memory of those past days.

'You see, sir, it never entered into my lady's head that I was flesh and blood like herself, and had a heart to feel and suffer, and had perhaps been foolish enough to fling it away where it wasn't wanted. Well, sir, things went on from bad to worse; and soon they were not content with meeting two or three times a week, but they must write to

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each other between whiles—and the letters were to be left in a hollow oak in Tangley Wood—just in the quietest, loneliest part of the wood, ever so far from any pathway or cattle track, and I must fetch and carry for them. I know it was wrong now, and I knew it then; but she coaxed and kissed me and bribed me, and seemed so miserable when I refused that I gave way, and used to carry her letters and fetch his, and was a regular go-between. And that was how the whole story came out.'

'How did it happen?'

'I think Sir Everard's valet must have watched me, and found out that I went to Tangley Wood. He had wanted to keep company with me, and I had refused, and he had turned spiteful, so that he and me hardly spoke to each other. Perhaps he fancied I had some other sweetheart, and that I went to Tangley Wood to meet him. I believe he told his master as much as this, and that I was not a fit person to be about Lady Courtenay, for one day when I went to fetch Mr. Blake's letter, Sir Everard followed me on horseback. I saw him riding along the road ever so far behind me as I crossed the common; but

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I didn't think he'd come my way, and I had no idea of danger. You may fancy what I felt when I turned round after getting my letter and saw him riding quietly towards me under the beech boughs, his horse's hoofs making no sound upon the mossy turf. He came upon me so sudden that I gave a little screech, and hadn't enough presence of mind to try and hide the letter.

'"What letter is that?" he asked, and I stammered out something about my lady. "You insolent hussy," he cried, "how dare you mix Lady Courtenay's name with your low intrigues?" and he bent over his horse's neck and snatched the letter out of my hand before I knew what he was doing If I hadn't known till that moment what a proud man he was, I should have known it then by the look he gave me when I mentioned my lady's name.

'There was no address upon the letter. He tore it open and read it, sitting there under the beech boughs; and I never in my life saw anything so dreadful as the change that came over his face as he read. He took no more notice of me than if I had been a worm, but dug his heels into his horse's sides

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and galloped off under the low boughs. I thought he must have dashed his brains out as he rode in among the trees. I guessed by the direction he had taken that he was going back to Fairview, and I would have given ten years of my life if I could have got there before him; but of course that was impossible.'

Lucy paused once more and lay back for a little while upon her pillow, the dew of weakness on her pale forehead. Morton was too deeply moved for speech. He handed her the glass of lemonade that stood on the little table by her side, and sat quietly waiting for her to continue her narrative.

'I ran till I came to the edge of the wood, and then walked as fast as ever I could the rest of the way. I went into the house through the offices, and asked one of the men-servants if Sir Everard had come home. The man said his master and Lady Courtenay were both in the morning-room. I went to the door, and stood outside listening, and then, hearing no sound of voices, I went in softly, and found no one in the room but my lady, and she was lying on the ground in a dead faint. I brought her to, and then she told me there had been a dreadful

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scene, and implored me to take a letter straight to Tangley Manor, and give it into Mr. Blake's own hands. "It is a matter of life and death, Lucy," she said. "You have stood by me so far, and you must stand by me to the end."

'How could I refuse her when she asked me, poor dear!—when she looked at me so piteously, with tears streaming down her pale cheeks? "I have not a friend in the world but you, Lucy," she said, and after that I would have gone through fire and water for her. So I told her to look sharp and write the letter, and I would take it, come what might. And take it I did, after dark, while Sir Everard was at dinner; for he was such a proud man that he went through all the mockery of a set dinner, just for the sake of throwing dust in the servants' eyes, I suppose; and he was such a curious man that he took no trouble to watch me, or my lady either. She went to her room directly she had written her letter, and locked herself in, and there I found her when I came home, after seeing your father at Tangley Manor.'

'Did you tell my father anything?'

'No, I only gave him the letter. That was all I

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had to do. He came out of the dining-room, where he was sitting, with his children round him, after dinner—two little girls in white frocks, and a boy. I suppose the boy was you?'

'Yes, I was the boy. God help me! How well I can remember that evening hour with my father, and how he used to make himself a boy in order to amuse and interest us.'

'Mr. Blake asked me if there was anything wrong, but I told him that he would learn everything from the letter, and then I hurried away. That was the last time I ever saw his face—the bright, manly face, with its pleasant look that I knew so well. Just as I was on the threshold of the hall door he caught my hand in his, and wrung it warmly. "God bless you, Lucy," he said. "Whatever may happen, I know you are true to us," and then he tried to squeeze a bank note into my hand, but I wouldn't have it. I wouldn't have taken a sixpence from him if I had been starving, though I loved him and honoured him with all my soul. But I shall never forget the touch of his hand or the sound of his voice that night. They have been a part of my life ever since.'

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She was silent for a little while, as if her thoughts had fixed themselves upon the picture of the past, and her eyes had a dreamy look, as she lay gazing at the bright square of blue sky framed by the fluttering leaves which wreathed the little casement.

'My lady kept her room all the next day. She was very low, poor thing, and inclined to be hysterical. I was with her all day, for indeed she was too ill to be left. Sir Everard went out directly after breakfast, in his hunting clothes, and I wondered that he should go out hunting that day. He had not seen his wife since the previous afternoon. He did not come back to dinner, and before he came home my lady had got much worse, and we had sent for Mr. Jebb, and he had advised sending to Highclere for old Dr. Newland. "I don't like the look of things," he said; "she hasn't as much strength as a canary bird."'

'At what time did Sir Everard come home that evening?' asked Morton, almost breathless in his eagerness.

'I do not know the exact hour. I am telling you the whole truth, now, Mr. Blake, for good or evil. I

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am keeping nothing back. It was late—ever so long after seven. It might have been eight, or even later; but I was sitting by my poor mistress's side, and I was keeping no count of time, except to think that every minute was an hour, in my anxiety for that feeble life which was fighting with death. Sir Everard came straight to his wife's room, and took my place by the bed. He did not look at me, or speak to me. He seemed to see no one but her; and he took very little heed of anything that was said to him. He sat as still as a stone figure, till by-and-by the doctor beckoned him out of the room, and then he sat by the fire in the dressing-room, just as still and lifeless, so that I thought he was asleep, till I went in to fetch something, and then I saw his eyes fixed on the fire with an awful look in them. At eleven o'clock the baby was born, and at half-past Sir Everard was brought in to see his wife. The doctors had very little hope of her, I could see that by their faces; but the monthly nurse, a stupid old woman from Highclere, who had no merit except having been a nurse in ever so many county families, pretended to take a cheerful view of my lady's con-

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dition, and declared she would come through everything beautifully. The two doctors went downstairs to get a little refreshment, and this chattering old woman was in the dressing-room with the baby, the door between the two rooms standing ajar, while Sir Everard sat by his wife's bed, and I remained in the bedroom in attendance upon her.

'He was very tender to her, and seemed full of grief. "Darling, you are going to get better very soon," he said. "I hope not," she answered. "I hope I am going to die." "Oh, my dearest, do not say that," he said gently. "That is too cruel." "But I must say it, Everard," she answered. "My life is all wrong. I have offended against you, though I am not the vile creature you called me yesterday; and I am steeped in misery. I hope God will be merciful and take me away from this wretched world."

'"My dearest," he said, "you have your baby to live for, your dear little daughter. A new life will begin for you from to-night." He knelt beside the bed and took her hand in his and kissed it, but she snatched it away impatiently. "Your hand is as cold as ice," she cried. "I am afraid of you." Just at this moment I

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heard whisperings in the next room, and then the old nurse exclaimed, "Lord have mercy on us, Mr. Blake!" and then there was more whispering, and then the word "murdered" sounded distinctly above all the rest.

'My lady lifted herself up in the bed and gave a loud shriek. "Walter Blake is murdered," she cried, "and you have done it." She stretched her arm out, pointing to her husband, and then fell back upon her pillow in hysterics. "You wicked old woman," I cried to the nurse, "run down stairs for the doctor." I held my lady in my arms and tried to keep her quiet, but she threw herself about on her pillow as if she wanted to beat herself to death, and every now and then she gave a little cry like a creature that has got its death-wound, and feels life ebbing away. The cries got fainter and fainter. Sir Everard was on his knees by her side, imploring her to listen to him, to be reasonable, to be merciful. "You did it," she cried, "you are the murderer." The doctors rushed into the room just after she had said this. Old Dr. Newland took her wrist in his hand and bent down to look at her eyes; and I knew by the glance he gave Mr. Jebb that all was over. She never spoke again,

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but turned her poor weary head restlessly from side to side, and flung her arms about with the same dreadful restlessness till the end. Oh, Mr. Blake, it was a terrible deathbed, and it was piteous to see her husband kneeling by her side, and to hear him entreating her to be calm, to be merciful to him, promising that the rest of her days should be happy if she would but try to live for his sake, promising to be her slave, the very dirt under her feet, if she would but live for him. But prayers could not lengthen her short life. It was easy to see how her strength was ebbing with every restless movement in that dreadful death-struggle. I think she was sensible to the very last. The last look she turned upon her husband is in my mind to-day—a look full of horror.'

'He did not deny that he had killed my father?' said Morton interrogatively.

'He may have taken her words for mere raving, and have thought it useless to contradict her.'

'But surely had he been able to do so he would have declared his innocence of such a crime.'

'That would have been easy to do were he ever

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so guilty. You have no right to think any the worse of him because he let his dying wife's words go by like the raving of fever, which nobody ever tries to argue with. His whole mind may have been taken up by the thought that she was dying. Oh! Mr. Blake, I want to be just to him, to be merciful to him, on my deathbed. There was a time when I thought my lady spoke the truth that night, that the mystery of your father's death was made clear to her in her last agony; but to-day I want to see things calmly and reasonably. I thought it was my duty to tell you all I knew, for I misled you that day at Avonmore. I wanted to shield Sir Everard as far as I could, for he has been a good friend to me. He turned me off after his wife's death, but he told me that if I was ever in poverty I was to apply to him, and he would help me, because Lady Courtenay had been fond of me. And after my marriage, when Green and I were in sore trouble for our rent, I wrote to Sir Everard, and he sent me ten pounds; and he told me he would send me the same sum quarterly as long as I wanted help; and God knows how my children and I would

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have lived without that forty pounds a year. So you see, sir, I am deeply beholden to Sir Everard, just as I am beholden to you for all your goodness to me; and it has only been the trouble of my mind that has made me tell you all this.'

'You have done very right to tell me. I have long been tormented by suspicions of the truth, and it is well for me to know all that can be known. One thing I will tell you for your comfort. I shall never try to bring Sir Everard Courtenay to justice, though I firmly and thoroughly believe that he is my father's murderer. For his daughter's sake he is safe from my revenge; but I will unravel the web of his mystery; I will make myself master of his secret; and only when I stand face to face with him, and charge him with his crime, shall I feel that I have done my duty as a son.'

'And you will not try to win Miss Courtenay for your wife?'

'No. That would be an unholy alliance.'

There came a faint little murmur, like a cry of pain, from the next room, but Morton took no heed of it, for just at the same moment a man's firm

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tread sounded on the stair, and Mr. Haldimond's cheery voice exclaimed, 'Ever so much better this heavenly day, I hope, Mrs. Green.'

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CHAPTER VI.

'IS HE STILL THE MASTER OF YOUR HEART?'

THAT faint cry of pain was the one expression of anguish wrung from Dulcie's wounded heart. She had heard all that sad story—even to those last words of Morton's.

'An unholy alliance!' Yes; it was but an echo of those still more terrible words spoken on his sick bed,—'The daughter of the murderer, and the son of the murdered!' She had but too well comprehended the idea that prompted that speech—even though it seemed but the baseless utterance of delirium. The thought of it had poisoned her life. Her father was suspected of a foul murder. Morton, whom she deemed wisest among mankind, had come to this terrible conclusion. And then, reading back along the story of her life, she had seen how much there was in the circumstances of the last six months to give colour to such a suspicion. Her father's unreasonable oppo-

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sition to Morton's suit in the first instance; his still more unreasonable cancelment of her engagement; his deepening gloom; the gulf between them, which seemed widening day by day. The thought of these things had weighed heavily upon Dulcie's heart ever since that day when she had sat beside Morton's bed, and had felt herself repudiated by him; and now came this painful story of the past, and the knowledge that her mother's last words had accused her father of Walter Blake's murder.

Morton rose as Arthur Haldimond entered the sick room.

'I will come and see you to-morrow, Mrs. Green,' he said, 'and if there is anything I can do for you in the meantime——'

'No, thank you, sir, I am well taken care of. If I was a duchess I couldn't be better off. Miss Blake and Miss Courtenay are always bringing me luxuries; and Mr. Haldimond comes to read to me sometimes, and cheers me up wonderfully. I think there must be something comfortable in the sound of your voice sir,' she said, looking at the curate with a faint smile

'I hope there is more comfort in what I read than

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in my voice, Mrs. Green, though it tickles a man's vanity to be so complimented,' answered Mr. Haldimond, in the easy tone that made him seem an old acquaintance wherever he went.

Morton had called upon the curate soon after his arrival at Austhorpe, but they had seen very little of each other since; for though Mr. Haldimond was always able to find time for lawn-tennis at Fairview he was generally too busy to accept Miss Blake's invitations to afternoon tea at Tangley Manor, a fact which Tiny took to heart, as she was passionately fond of tennis, had succeeded in getting an exceptionally fine ground, and considered herself a crack player.

'We are not good enough for Mr. Haldimond,' she said; 'we smell of trade. I suppose he will go to no one who hasn't a long pedigree.'

Aunt Dora defended the curate warmly.

'He is as good as gold,' she said, 'and I won't hear him made light of because he doesn't choose to waste the time which he wants for good works in playing at bat and ball with a chit like you.'

'No, but he is always ready for bat and ball with a

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chit like Dulcie. His good works go by the board when she wants him,' retorted Tiny.

Mr. Haldimond and Morton shook hands as the latter left the room, and then the curate seated himself by the bed, and took out his book.

'As you have been chatting with Mr. Blake I shan't let you talk,' he said pleasantly, 'for I feel sure you are tired. Will you eat a little of that nice-looking jelly while I read to you ? '

He handed her a plate of calves'-foot jelly, putting the spoon into her feeble hand, and watching her as she took a few morsels, with such languid appetite as showed she eat rather to please him than herself.

He was turning over the leaves of his Testament looking for a comforting chapter, when he was startled by a sound in the next room, a very audible sob.

' What is that ? ' he asked, putting down his book. 'Is one of the children in trouble ? Not my friend Mattie, I hope.'

' The children. What was it? Yes, there is some one crying,' exclaimed the invalid, lifting herself up in the bed. 'Is one of them hurt, do you think ? '

'Don't be frightened,' said Mr. Haldimond; 'it is nothing, I dare say. I'll see into it.'

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He went into the next room. Dulcie was on her knees by Mattie's little bed, her face buried in the coverlet, her whole frame shaken by her sobs. Arthur Haldimond had just presence of mind to call out to the invalid, 'All right, Mrs. Green, it is not one of the children,' and to shut the door between the two rooms. And then, with his heart aching as it had seldom ached in his life, he knelt beside Dulcie and laid his hand gently on her shoulder.

'Dulcie, what has happened to distress you? For God's sake tell me,' he said, with infinite tenderness.

Never before had he called her by her Christian name, but in this moment he could not for worlds have said, 'Miss Courtenay.'

'Dulcie,' he repeated, 'what is amiss with you?'

'Everything; my whole life,' she sobbed. 'Don't try to comfort me, Mr. Haldimond. I am hopelessly miserable.'

'But I will try to comfort you. I will not believe that your sorrow is incurable. There is no hopeless misery on this earth. At our worst we have the prospect of comfort and happiness in the world to come.'

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'Yes, but that is such a long way off,' answered Dulcie drearily, 'and we all want to be happy here. I suppose that is only human. But my sorrow stretches to the world beyond earth. There is no comfort for me—none.'

'You will never make me believe that,' said Arthur Haldimond firmly. 'Can you not trust me freely, thoroughly, as I would trust you in any trouble of mine? Think of me first as a priest, secondly as your faithful friend. What is it that makes you unhappy? Is it the breaking of your engagement to Mr. Blake? For if it were that alone, perhaps,' he faltered just a little here, looking at her with a soul-searching gaze, 'the interference of a disinterested friend might be useful, and your father might consent to the renewal of your betrothal——'

'No, no, no,' she cried hastily, 'that can never be. Morton and I have made up our minds about that. We are both resigned to being parted. There are reasons why we can never marry.'

Then that is not your sorrow?'

'No,' she answered with a heart-breaking sigh.

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'Thank God,' ejaculated Mr. Haldimond in a low voice.

'I have been very sorry—I grieved very much at parting with Morton—but that pain was a dead, dull sorrow that I could bear, and which would have lessened, I dare say, as the years went by. No, that is not my trouble. That grief is bearable.'

'You mystify, you torture me,' said Mr. Haldimond. 'I would give half my life—all my life to comfort you. For God's sake trust me. I am a man of the world; I know how to face the difficulties and perplexities of life. It must go hard with me if I cannot help you. Only confide in me.'

'That is impossible,' she answered gravely, and in a tone so resolute even in its gentleness that Arthur Haldimond knew her decision was irrevocable.

'Why can you not tell me the nature of your sorrow?'

'Because it is somebody else's sorrow as well as mine. I can pour out my grief to no one but God. Pray forget all about it—put it out of your mind. You can do no good in any way. You may do great harm if you talk about my trouble.'

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'Talk about it! Dulcie, what do you take me for?' he asked reproachfully.

'I beg your pardon. I forgot that with you all secrets are safe. It is a part of your office to be trusted in the hour of trouble.'

She had risen from her knees and dried her tears, and was standing quietly by the window, pale and grave, and with a womanly dignity in her face and manner that claimed his respect as much as her grief claimed his pity. He went across to her and took her hand, and stood beside her looking down at the fair girlish face, made womanly by a great sorrow.

'Dulcie, my heart always yearns to a creature in trouble,' he said, 'if it were only one of the dumb things in the fields—but to see you sorrowful, to see you bowed down by a grief that I must not know and cannot comfort—that is too bitter. Dulcie, my delight, my love; do you not understand that your griefs are more to me than all other sorrow in the world—that you are dearer to me than anything upon this earth? From the happy Sabbath when I first saw your sweet, sad face, with its pathetic pain, I have been learning to love you. I think I loved

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you at the first—that my heart leapt into life at the sight of your face, kindling with a fire it had never felt before. Dulcie, tell me, is it hopeless for me—have you any remnant of love left for me? Were it but the least and faintest spark of that holy fire, I would be content, knowing that I could cherish and warm it into a flame.'

She stood before him with downcast eyes, letting him tell his story. A delicate bloom crept into her pallid cheeks as she listened—a faint smile curved the faintly-tinted lips. At last she lifted her eyelids and looked at him with sad, serious eyes.

'You have been very good to me,' she murmured. 'Pray believe that I am grateful, and that I honour and esteem you. I am proud to think that you care for me, and I shall carry the memory of your words to my grave. Yes, I shall always remember you as one of the best and truest friends Heaven has given me. But you must never again talk to me of love. You must think of me as if I were a Roman Catholic and had taken the veil. I shall never marry. The same reason that forbids my marriage with Morton would prevent my marrying any one else.'

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'And if there had not been this obstacle—if you were free to engage yourself——'

'Even then I could have no heart to give,' she answered. 'Think what a little while ago I was engaged to Morton.'

'But is he still as dear to you as when that engagement was broken?' asked Mr. Haldimond. 'Is he still the master of your heart?'

A vivid blush dyed Dulcie's cheeks and brow. She turned her head hastily away. The hand which Arthur Haldimond was holding trembled in his. She drew it from his gentle clasp.

'You have no right to ask such questions,' she said, drawing herself up a little. 'I have told you the truth. I shall never marry. I shall take care of my dear—father—and be his faithful companion as long as he lives—and then—if—I lose him—I suppose God will take care of me.'

All her calmness deserted her in a moment, and tears streamed from her eyes.

'Good-bye,' she said, hurrying to the door. 'Don't follow me, please. Don't—I am better by myself.'

Arthur Haldimond reluctantly obeyed her.

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'I see light,' he said to himself. 'Whatever her sorrow is, it is her father's trouble rather than hers. It shall be my task to fathom the mystery, and to cure the evil.'

He left the cottage half an hour later, proud and hopeful; for that sudden glow of colour in Dulcie's face, the fair head turned shyly from him, had told him that her heart secretly acknowledged a new master; that Morton was no longer without a rival in her love.

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CHAPTER VII.

MORTON'S BRILLIANT IDEA.

MORTON BLAKE went home that afternoon confirmed in his belief in Sir Everard's guilt. That belief had taken root in his mind in spite of himself, and had slowly grown upon him as time went by. Shafto Jebb's story of the hoof-prints of a second horse on the spot where the murder was committed fitted curiously with the story of the finding of the spur; and the groom's disappearance gave weight to his evidence, for it indicated that he had been tampered with by some one in Sir Everard's interest. And now Lucy Green's death-bed confession made the whole mystery clear—set before Morton's eyes, as in a picture, the tragedy of his father's death. The husband, loving deeply, deeply wronged, and avenging himself horribly upon his treacherous friend.

Dearly as Morton loved his father, and bitterly as he deplored his untimely fate, he could not, as a man,

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withhold his pity from the murderer. Had the two men met formally face to face, as they might have done fifty years ago, and the lover had died by the hand of the betrayed husband, the world could hardly have condemned the successful duellist. It was just possible that Walter Blake had not fallen without a struggle for life; that he had wrestled with his assailant before he received his death-stroke. It was hardly consistent with Sir Everard's character and education to have played the stealthy assassin. But that his hands had been dyed in Walter Blake's blood, that the man who had just died in Portland prison had played a fool's part, and accused himself of a crime he had not committed, Morton was thoroughly convinced. He remembered Sir Everard's reluctance to accept the vagabond's confession; his willingness to let the man escape; how he had been incredulous from the first. He remembered his ghastly face in the witness box, when his dead wife's name had been imported into the inquiry.

Now, he told himself, he knew that Sir Everard was the murderer. It was no longer a matter of suspicion—a darkly-brooding fear. It was conviction, and more than conviction. It was knowledge.

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What was he to do?

Humphrey Vargas was dead. Justice to him demanded no sacrifice from the living. He had passed altogether out of the question. And, anxious as Mrs. Barnard was to clear her children from the reproach involved in her father's supposed guilt, it would have been hard to sacrifice Dulcie's tenderest feelings to a morbid sensitiveness on the part of a vagabond's daughter.

'Mrs. Barnard's children must take their chance,' thought Morton. 'Their grandfather inflicted this disgrace upon his name of his own free will—being a thief and a vagabond already—and it is no duty of mine to wipe the stain from his grand-children's pedigree.'

Two considerations were now paramount in his mind; first, the thought that his father's dishonour must be kept from the gossip of the newspapers and the tittle-tattle of clubs and coteries. It would be a poor thing to avenge his father's death by bringing Sir Everard to the dock, if in so doing he must reveal the one dark spot in his father's life—the one dishonour in an honourable career—to the malignant

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scrutiny of a world that loves to hear of sin in high places. Secondly, for Dulcie's sake, for the love of her who must ever seem to him purest and sweetest among women, he would do much to shield Sir Everard from the law, even while he longed to pour upon him the vials of an orphaned son's wrath.

He walked in Tangley Wood till the summer light was deepening into shadow, brooding upon what he had heard, meditating upon the duty that lay before him, and thinking how he could best make that duty fit in with the other claims upon his time and thought.

His ambition—that ardent desire to be of some use in his generation, to leave the world in some wise better than he found it, which is the loftiest kind of ambition—had been reawakened by Lizzie Hardman's influence. Life, which for a while had seemed a burden to him, had again become full of work and hope. His days were no longer empty, albeit the rosy light of first love shone upon them no more. He had taught himself to believe that there were other joys for which a man might live—the delight

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of success in good work, the rapture of improving the lives of other people.

The election at Blackford was to take place at the e nd of the session, and it was already known in the big, bustling town that Morton Blake was going to stand. His speeches at Highclere, and the pamphlet on compulsory education which he had lately published, had won him friends among the most enlightened section of the working classes. He was not a man to please extreme Radicals. He had the warmest sympathy with the operatives' claims and wrongs; but he saw in trade unionism disadvantages and perils in the future which outweighed the benefits to be derived from it in the present. He had, therefore, openly declared himself adverse to the system, and had in so doing hazarded his popularity among a constituency chiefly consisting of working men. But he had the courage of his opinions, and was prepared to defend them in the teeth of dead cats and rotten eggs, or any symbolism by which the sons of toil might choose to express their opinions.

Lizzie had told him that he was sure of success at Blackford, that he would there be appreciated and

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understood; and of late he had fallen, quite unconsciously, into the habit of thinking Miss Hardman the most enlightened person among his acquaintances.

'She has such a well-balanced mind, such a calm, dispassionate way of looking at things, that I don't think she would be led astray by her own regard for me,' he told himself. 'And if it were only out of gratitude for all her goodness to me, I ought to pay her the poor compliment of taking her advice.'

He had thought a good deal about Lizzie lately, giving her all the thought he had to spare after the one absorbing idea of Sir Everard's guilt, and the secondary consideration of his own parliamentary prospects. He was deeply impressed with a sense of obligation to Lizzie for her devotion to him during his illness, and his slow return to health. He wanted to testify his gratitude in some permanent and substantial manner; and upon this very evening he found an opportunity of taking his aunt Dora into his confidence, and asking her advice in the matter.

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They were loitering about the garden together, looking at the standard roses, in the cultivation whereof Miss Blake took special pride, while the two girls played lawn-tennis with Lord Beville and Lady Frances, who had dropped in after dinner. Frances and Morton seemed to have grown less intimate since his illness. He knew that she had become Dulcie's bosom friend, and he shrank with a morbid sensitiveness from any conversation which might lead to the mention of Dulcie's name. Frances saw that he in some measure avoided her. She was pained and wounded by his coldness, but she was too generous to be angry.

'There was a time when a cold look from him hurt me like a sharp sword,' she said to herself. 'But that time is past and gone. Morton is no longer all the world to me. Indeed I almost wonder that I could ever have cared about such a commonplace young man.'

'Auntie,' said Morton, with sudden seriousness, as they stood before a superb Marshal Neil, 'has Lizzie any money of her own?'

'Why, Morton, what a question! She has plenty

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of money: but if you mean by inheritance, not a penny. Her people were quite poor. Her grandfather and yours were fellow-workmen together in the same foundry; but while your grandfather climbed to the top of the ladder, hers remained at the bottom. They were staunch friends to the last; and when I heard that Matthew Hardman's eldest son had been left a widower with six children, I felt I should be showing respect to my dear father's memory by taking the smallest of them off his hands altogether, and adopting her as my own. Poor Matthew died soon after, and Lizzie's nearest relation is his brother, who was very good and helpful in planting out the three surviving children. Of course I shall leave Lizzie well provided for. She must know that, though I have never told her so in plain words.'

'Of course, dearest auntie. But in the meantime Lizzie has no money that is absolutely her own.'

'I don't know what you mean by absolutely her own. I give her an allowance for her gowns and pocket-money. It is paid quarterly, and is as much her own as money can be. She spends very little of

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it upon herself, dear child, for it is her delight to help others.'

'And every time she receives this allowance she must feel a sense of obligation. It is a gift, however freely given—not an income arising from capital in her own possession.'

'Good gracious, Morton, what a commercial mind you must have! What difference can it make to her?'

'A good deal, I imagine, to a girl of sensitive nature.'

'Lizzie loves me too well, and is too sure of my love, to feel any obligation in the matter.'

'My dear aunt, the sense of obligation is just the one feeling that cannot be eradicated from the human mind. In some natures it cometh up as the flower we call gratitude, in others it is a weed that strangles affection. Now, I am at this moment labouring under the sense of obligation to Lizzie, and I want to prove to her that I am grateful. You know how more than good she was to me during my illness.'

'Can I ever forget it?'

'Now, I want to reward her kindness—I can

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never extinguish the obligation—in a really substantial manner: and I have been thinking that I could hardly do better than invest, say four thousand pounds, in her own name, in North-Western stock, and quietly hand her the certificates in an envelope, with my love. That would give her about one hundred and sixty pounds a year; and she need no longer be dependent upon you for her gowns and bonnets.'

'Morton,' cried Miss Blake, turning indignantly upon her nephew, 'I am astonished at you!'

'My dearest auntie.'

'I am surprised at your want of proper feeling. What, do you think that such devotion, such tenderness, as Lizzie's are to be bought and paid for?'

'Of course not. But I think such goodness ought to be recompensed in some substantial manner.'

'That is only another way of saying that it ought to be paid for. I did not think you could be so unkind.'

'That is rather rough upon a fellow, auntie, when he is trying to be kind.'

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'It only shows me how little you understand Lizzie's nature. I am very glad you mooted the question to me, rather than to her. Had you made such a proposition to Lizzie herself you would have broken her heart.'

'Is she so sensitive?'

'She is very sensitive—where you are concerned.'

The phrase struck Morton as curious, but he attached no direct signification to it. He thought his aunt was just a little foolish in her readiness to take offence for her *protégée*.

'Well, my dear auntie,' he said after a pause, 'I suppose you are right. No doubt women understand each other's feelings much better than we rougher creatures can comprehend the gentler sex. I could very well afford to part with four thousand pounds; and I fancied it would be nice for Lizzie to have a little income of her own to fritter away upon small charities and presents to her needy brother and sisters at Blackford—but since you say it must not be, I must content myself with offering her some substantial present—a diamond bracelet—or a pony carriage—or something of that kind. What do you

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say to a pony carriage, with the most perfect thing in cobs to draw it—and then Lizzie could never be snubbed by my sisters when she wanted a drive?'

'I think she would be absolutely enchanted. She is very fond of driving, and adores horses. To have a cob of her own would be delightful to her. Tiny and Horatia have been always rather grudging in allowing her the use of the ponies.'

'I'll see Jebb this afternoon and get him to look out for a cob. We must have something perfect. And Dulliner, of Avonmore, shall build the carriage —as light and dainty a thing as Queen Mab's car. I would much rather have given her the railway stock—but if the pony-trap will please her, I am content.'

'This time you really have hit upon a brilliant idea, Morton,' said his aunt, smiling at him. 'Not that there is the least need to make her a present of any kind. Such goodness as hers is always its own reward.'

'I suppose that is why the recipients take so little trouble to show their gratitude,' answered Morton, laughing.

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CHAPTER VIII.

A PARAGON OF COBS.

MORTON saw Mr. Jebb early next day, and told him his desire to possess a perfect specimen of the genus cob.

'Have you any fancy about colour?' asked the surgeon, who knew the pedigree and merits of almost every horse within twenty miles of Austhorpe.

'I am not particular as to that; but I should like a gray.'

'Grays are more subject to heart disease than any other kind of horse,' said Mr. Jebb, with a surgical air.

'I think I would risk that, if I saw a perfect gray.'

'I fancy I know where to put my hand upon the very thing you want; but the man who owns him will ask a stiffish price.'

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'I am willing to give a good price if I can get value for my money.'

Mr. Jebb then proceeded to relate the biography of the animal in question. How he had been bred by a gentleman farmer, whose place was three miles on the other side of Highclere; how from his earliest colthood upwards he had been a thing of beauty and a joy to all the neighbourhood; how his legs were stronger than crowbars, and his hind-quarters a marvel of muscular development. Mr. Jebb gave the technical name to every joint, as he ran over the cob's perfections.

'But you'll have to give a long price for him,' he concluded, shaking his head solemnly. 'However, you won't mind that. Fifty pounds more or less won't matter to you.'

'Is he good-tempered?' asked Morton. 'Could a lady drive him?'

'A baby could—an infant of two years old. He'd have nothing to do but sit behind him and hold the reins. Gentle as a sheep—manners perfect.'

'Why does his owner want to sell him?' asked Morton, rather suspiciously.

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'Simply because he bred him to sell. The man is not exactly a dealer, but he has some fine grass land, and he makes money by horses when he can. He has kept this cob longer than he intended, because he's too good for the neighbourhood. Nobody about here will give the price. Mrs. Aspinall wanted him, but Mrs. Aspinall wanted to skin my friend Tilberry, and Tilberry wasn't to be had. "I'd rather the cob eat his head off three times over," he said to me, "than I'd be jewed out of him."'

'I should like to see the cob,' said Morton.

'Of course you would. I'll drive you over to Tilberry's this afternoon, if you'll go.'

'I think I'd better drive you over,' said Morton, aware that Mr. Jebb's horses were generally screws, the gentleman knowing what was good, but not being able to afford himself the luxury of possession. 'I'll drive you in my dog-cart, and you must come back to Tangley to dine, if you have nothing better to do with yourself. But not a word about the cob before my womenkind. I want the business kept quiet for the present.'

'Precisely,' replied Jebb. 'I never talk about

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business before ladies. The wheels of domestic life go so much smoother when the dear creatures are kept in a state of happy ignorance.'

The two gentlemen were at Alderwood Farm by five o'clock, and Mr. Tilberry, being forewarned by a telegram from his friend the surgeon, was at home to receive them. He had the smart, knowing air peculiar to men who make money out of horseflesh; but he seemed honest withal, and the cob was obviously an honest horse.

He was undoubtedly handsome—'handsome as paint,' Mr. Jebb called him; and he went through his paces without committing the smallest indiscretion.

He had a kind eye, and lovingly reciprocated every attention that was shown him.

'I only wish I could afford to keep him for myself,' said Mr. Tilberry, gazing admiringly at the animal; 'but I can't. He's too good for me.'

The cob's appearance being in every way satisfactory, his purchase was only a question of figures, and Morton Blake was inclined to be liberal. He offered Mr. Tilberry a cheque for only twenty

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pounds less than he asked; whereas that gentleman had provided himself with a wide margin for bargaining, and could very well have afforded to abate forty. The purchase was agreed on the spot; provided always that the veterinary examination should prove satisfactory.

'I'm not afraid of that,' said Mr. Tilberry, with conscious rectitude.

'What do you call him?' asked Morton.

'Tommy,' answered the farmer. 'I'm not fanciful about naming my stock. If I breed a horse I call him Tommy, and all my mares are Polly—Bay Polly or Brown Polly, Gray Tommy or Roan Tommy, as the case may be. It saves a world of trouble.'

The cob was to be examined by the Highclere veterinary surgeon that evening, and sent over to Tangley next morning. Morton had telegraphed to Mr. Dulliner to put the carriage in hand immediately, trusting to the coachbuilder's own taste to turn out a perfect article, so the whole business was in a fair way to completion.

It seemed strange that so small a matter as this

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should have served to divert Morton's mind from that gloomy brooding upon one painful theme which had darkened his life for the last six months. Yet so it was. His thoughts were full of Lizzie and her delight at receiving a gift so unexpected and so acceptable as the cob and carriage must needs be. He had seen her trudge forth cheerily on many a sultry summer morning, to walk four or five miles along a dusty road, on some errand of charity; while his sisters drove off to Highclere to make some frivolous purchase in millinery or fancy work, which they chose to consider indispensable to their existence.

'So sorry I can't drive you to your poor woman, Lizzie,' Tiny would say, with that beaming good-nature which is the happy gift of some selfish people. 'Another time I might be going that way; but I know you adore walking.'

And now Lizzie would have her own carriage, and would be independent of these fine ladies.

He was quite impatient for the arrival of the cob next morning, and could hardly eat his breakfast, so full were his thoughts of Lizzie and the

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pleasure in store for her. He was not going to wait for the carriage, but had made up his mind to present the cob immediately. Lizzie was devotedly fond of animals, and would cherish and idolize him, without doubt.

'I dare say auntie is right,' he said to himself, glancing at Lizzie, who was pouring out tea at the other end of the table, fresh and bright-looking in her neat blue-and-white print gown, a garment which gave the laundry-maids little trouble, and contrasted curiously with the cambric frills, pleatings, puffings, and embroidery of the breakfast gowns affected by Tiny and Horatia.

'That's one very nice point in Lizzie's character,' said Tiny complacently, on one occasion. 'She knows her place, and never tries to imitate *us*.'

The blue-and-white striped gown, neatly fitting the neat figure, just short enough to show the neat little foot in its blue stocking and Cromwell shoe, the useful scissors and pin-cushion hanging from the black waistband, the black silk apron, and plain linen collar gave Lizzie the look of a Parisian grisette; in the days when De Musset, grisettes, and

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the Quartier Latin were in their glory. Morton looked at her with frank, brotherly admiration. What a bright face it was to see at a breakfast-table!—dark eyes full of mind and expression—dark hair neatly brushed back from the wide, full brow, and a complexion rosy with the healthful bloom that comes from an active life spent chiefly in the open air.

Andrew came in just as breakfast was finished, and made a confidential announcement in his master's ear.

'Girls,' cried Morton, rising hastily, 'I have bought a cob, and I want you to come and look at him.'

Tiny and Horatia were on their feet instantly, but Lizzie went on quietly with her knitting, which she carried about with her and proceeded with at all odd moments, like Mrs. Poyser.

'Is he for saddle?' asked Tiny, with an idea that he might carry her to hounds next winter.

'No, for harness. Come, Lizzie, you must see him too. I want your opinion most especially.'

'Since when has Lizzie become a great authority upon horse-flesh?' asked Horatia, with a sneer.

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She was very fond of Miss Hardman, as she told everybody, in her place, but that place was a lowly one, and Horatia's jealousy was up in arms at the idea of Lizzie's opinion being deferred to by the master of the house.

'People who are very fond of horses are generally pretty good judges of them,' answered Morton carelessly. 'I am particularly anxious to know what Lizzie thinks of this one.'

'I can't imagine what you want with another horse,' exclaimed Horatia captiously. 'Your hunters are kept to be looked at, and you work your dog-cart horse so little that he is generally as wild as a hawk.'

'Never mind that, Horry. This new animal is a particular fancy of mine, and I don't think you will any of you find fault with him.'

They were on their way to the stable yard while this conversation was going on, and had by this time arrived on the scene where Gray Tommy was to show his paces. The stable yard was by no means a bad place upon a warm summer morning—the windows of stables and coachmen's rooms and saddle room all

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bright with flowers—stocks, fuchsias, geraniums, mignonette—the yard as clean as a spinster's best parlour, the grooms lounging at open doors in their cool morning attire, the dogs straining at their chains, the horses rattling their head-stalls in the dusky interior of the stables, and the morning sunlight agreeably tempered by the shadow of old limes and maples, which stretched their big branches across the wall that divided the stables from the shrubbery.

A smart-looking groom had led over the cob, and now with an air of pride pulled off his clothing and exhibited him to his new owner.

Tommy was in that lustrous and preternaturally sleek condition to which an accomplished dealer, and nobody else, is able to bring a horse. He arched his handsome neck, and bent his beautiful head shyly, and then looked round with a startled air, as knowing that he was amongst strangers.

Lizzie Hardman went straight up to him and patted his nose, and made much of him. She would have done the same for any old waggon-horse on the farm, having an intense love of the equine race generally, without reference to breed or beauty.

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'Well, Lizzie, how do you like him?' asked Morton, smiling at her as she stood with her wavy brown hair resting on the cob's plump neck, and her hand caressing his velvet muzzle.

Horse and girl made a pretty picture in the morning light; and Morton thought how nice it would be to have them photographed just at this moment.

'I'm not the least bit of a judge, as you all know,' answered Lizzie, without taking her eyes off the cob, "but I think him absolutely beautiful—a paragon of cobs.'

'Then suppose we call him Paragon, instead of Tommy,' said Morton; and then going close up to her, he added, 'I am very glad you like him, Lizzie, for I want you to be his mistress. You are a very active young lady, always going here, there, and everywhere on some good office. I want you to accept the cob, and a carriage I am having built for him, as a small souvenir of all your goodness to me while I was ill. Nothing I can do, nothing I can say, could ever be enough to prove my gratitude; but the cob may just serve to remind you that I have been grateful.'

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The girl looked at him in sheer amazement, as if she could hardly believe her ears, then tears rushed to her eyes: she tried to speak, and could not, and then she turned on her heel and ran across the yard and into the house as fast as her feet could carry her.

'What in the name of all that's reasonable is the matter with Lizzie?' ejaculated Horatia, who had not been near enough to hear what Morton said. 'Has she gone suddenly mad? If this is the effect of her love of horses she had better keep out of the stables.'

'It's nothing,' answered Morton, laughing in a somewhat embarrassed manner. 'The dear girl is needlessly sensitive to the smallest kindness. The cob is a present for her, and she is quite overcome at the idea of possessing him.'

Tiny came a step forward from the spot where she had been standing gracefully posed at Aunt Dora's side, and contemplated her brother with her eyes opened to their widest extent.

'This time it is you who are going mad,' she exclaimed. 'That cob,' pointing at the animal with extended finger, "that—cob—a—present—for—Lizzie Hardman! You must be dreaming!'

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'I never felt myself wider awake.'

'What in mercy's name will she do with him?'

'Well, I don't suppose she'll put him in her pocket, or wish to keep him in the drawing-room, retorted Morton lightly. 'I should imagine she'll sit in the carriage I have ordered for her and drive him: and as she goes about a good deal, chiefly to do good to other people, and as she can rarely get the loan of your carriage, I imagine she will find him uncommonly useful.'

Tiny gave a long sigh, and looked at Horatia. Horatia echoed the sigh, and returned the look, with interest.

'Auntie,' said Tiny, with charming insolence, 'I had no idea there was madness in the family. You ought to have told us; for then we might have been prepared for this outbreak of cobs and chaises.'

'You seem to forget what reason I have to be grateful to Lizzie, and how very small an expression of my gratitude this little offering is.'

'Oh, a mere trifle, like a pair of gloves or a pocket handkerchief,' exclaimed Tiny, with an angry toss of her head. 'All I can say is, you never gave

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me a horse, and that you were extremely disagreeable when I asked you to let me ride Butterfly to hounds.'

'I think you are both disagreeable and ill-bred, Tiny,' said Dora Blake. 'I could not have believed that you could be capable of such an exhibition of bad feeling.'

'Oh, of course, auntie, I always knew that Lizzie was your favourite: but I thought Horatia and I stood first in Morton's estimation.'

'You are utterly unreasonable and provoking, Tiny,' said Morton, walking away, 'and I am not in the mood to argue you out of your folly.'

The grooms had happily retired into the background with the cob while this discussion was in progress. Tiny and Horatia went into the shrubbery, their cheeks crimson, to talk over Morton's absurd conduct. Miss Blake went straight to Lizzie's room.

She found the girl crying as if her heart were broken, and almost hysterical.

'My dear Lizzie, this is too foolish.'

'I know it is, auntie dear,' answered Lizzie, strangling a final sob with a great effort. 'How Morton—how you all must despise me! But, indeed,

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I could not help it. The surprise—the idea that he had thought so much of my paltry services—his delicate consideration in choosing the very present which I should most delight in—quite overcame me. I could not for the life of me have helped making a fool of myself. And now I will sit down quietly and write Morton a few lines thanking him, as well as I can, for his dear gift. Oh the lovely creature! and to be my very own! It is too much.'

'My poor child, do you think you are of less value in this house than the rest of us, and that your pleasure ought not to be considered?'

'Dear auntie, I know that I am here through your charity. You have done everything in the world to make me forget that fact, but the fact remains all the same. What right have I to horses and carriages, and to all the luxuries I enjoy? None whatever. I owe everything to your bounty.'

'I won't hear such a word, Lizzie. You are my niece—my daughter—by adoption. I took your life into my keeping when you were almost a baby, and I took upon myself the duty of making you happy.'

'And I have been completely happy with you,

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dearest. I am always wondering why Providence has been so good to me.'

'And you are always proving your gratitude to Providence by your goodness to other people, Lizzie. Don't write to Morton, dear; that would be ever so much too formal. Just go down to his study and tell him quietly that you are pleased with his gift.'

'I will,' said Lizzie, looking as if it were a tremendous ordeal.

'Why, surely you are not afraid of him?'

'Afraid of him? No, but I am afraid of my own feelings.'

The words were most innocently spoken, yet they set Dora Blake wondering.

'God forbid that this attention of Morton's should prove cruel kindness!' she thought. 'But my Lizzie is too strong-minded for any idle sentiment. She would never care for a man who did not care for her.'

Lizzie ran down to the hall, opened the study door and looked in. Morton was not at his desk, in his usual absorbed attitude, with books and papers about him. He was standing by the open window

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looking idly out at the garden, where the butterflies were skimming across the roses, and the bees humming drowsily in the big white lilies.

'Morton, I have come to thank you for your gift. I was so surprised just now, that I could find no words to express my gratitude.'

'My dear Lizzie, gratitude is all on my side. I am deeply obliged by your goodness to me; and the cob is the most trifling expression of my regard. Had I followed my own inclination I should have offered you something better worth having; but I thought, perhaps, you might imagine I wanted to extinguish the obligation; and, believe me, I do not. I am willing to be your debtor to the end of my life.'

'There is no debt,' faltered Lizzie, pale and grave, and with a troubled air which Morton could not help seeing. 'Can you suppose that I was not glad to be of some small use in this house, where my life has been made so pleasant? I shall love the cob — Paragon, I think you said he was to be called —with all my heart.'

'Love him and make him work for you. Re-

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member you are to be his sole mistress. He shall have the loose box at the end of the yard, and Thomas, who is a kind of *protégé* of my aunt's, I believe, shall be your own particular groom.'

Lizzie murmured a few more words of thankfulness, and then gladly made her escape, touched beyond measure by Morton's kindness, and in no wise foreseeing the pain it was to bring upon her.

But it was not long before the evil effects of Morton's gush of gratitude became painfully obvious to the innocent Paragon's mistress. Clementine and Horatia resented Lizzie's possession of the cob as if it had been an act of arrogance and self-assertion upon her own part. They kept some slight curb upon their tongues before Aunt Dora; they were careful not to push their insolence too far in the hearing of their brother. But when they had poor Lizzie all to themselves they gave full vent to their jealous displeasure, in hints and innuendoes which were a great deal worse to bear than the plainest speech. Lizzie possessed more than the common share of self-command. She had schooled herself in years gone by to endure a good deal of quiet insolence from the

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sisters, who in the white frock and blue sash period of their existence had taken pains to assert their superiority to their aunt's dependent, all in the most amiable and affectionate manner, loving their dear Lizzie fondly—in her 'place.' As they grew up selfishness and self-assertion had become the habit of their minds, encouraged by their aunt's unselfishness and Lizzie's willingness to take the lowest place. It had seemed to them the most natural thing in the world, a part of the original scheme of creation, as it were, that they should enjoy all the luxuries of life, and that Lizzie should do without them. They even went so far as to declare that they envied her her simpler tastes and her more active habits, her love of long walks and indifference to evening parties.

'I really think you could go through life wearing cotton gloves, and hardly mind,' said Tiny, with contemptuous wonder.

'I really believe I could,' answered Lizzie, who had made away with a quarter's allowance in buying a widow's only son his discharge from the Hussar regiment in which he had foolishly enlisted.

'Well, dear, you may wear them as long as you

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please, provided you don't put them on when you are coming out with me,' replied Tiny playfully. 'The very sight of a cotton glove sets my teeth on edge.'

The new carriage from Avonmore arrived at Tangley about a week after the advent of the cob. It was a park phaeton, a marvel of neatness combined with elegance; the colouring subdued and sober, the outline perfect grace.

'Well, my dear Morton,' said Horatia, with a sigh, when the Avonmore carriage had been surveyed by the assembled family, 'if you suppose that after seeing this I am ever again going to drive that rattle-trap of a chaise you were good enough to bestow upon your sisters six years ago, you are vastly mistaken.'

'I have not the least objection to your giving Mr. Dulliner an order for a carriage to-morrow, my dear Horatia. There is plenty of room on the premises, and you can afford to gratify any whim of that kind.'

A disinclination to spend her own money, when she could possibly have her desires gratified at anybody else's expense, was a marked characteristic of

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Horatia's practical mind. Indeed, it was perhaps in this line that her business capacity showed itself. The sisters each possessed a handsome sum in the funds; but while Tiny's selfishness took the form of a lavish expenditure on her own whims and fancies, and generally landed her in insolvency before the half-year was out, Horatia's regard for her own interest was demonstrated by her strict prudence, and had enabled her already to make various small investments on her own account.

So Morton's sisters went on driving their chestnut ponies, and the carriage which had been elegant enough in its day, but which had a shabby air when contrasted with Mr. Dulliner's masterpiece; and envy rankled in their breasts, and black care held on behind as they drove. Paragon proved worthy of his name. He was as sensible as a Christian, said the grooms; and they might have gone so far as to say that he was more sensible than many Christians; for he had a placid nature, did his work cheerfully, and trotted along the country lanes at an honest, equal pace, like a cob who was glad to earn his salt.

The better Paragon behaved the more angry

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Horatia and Clementine felt about him. If he had turned out a screw—if he had been a confirmed jibber, and had backed the pony carriage into a ditch —if Lizzie had been utterly unable to drive him, they might have become reconciled to the cob's existence, and might have looked upon the whole business as a subject for good-humoured ridicule. But, as it was, the angry fire in each girlish breast, suppressed and smouldering, grew every day fiercer and more ready to burst into flame.

At length came the conflagration. Miss Blake had driven over to Highclere to lunch with Lady Ritherdon, and Lizzie was alone with the two girls. The afternoon had turned out wet, whereby Clementine, who had prepared an elaborate costume for a lawn party, and was denied the delight of exhibiting herself in it, was in a fretful and dissatisfied mood, thinking that the world in a general way had gone wrong.

The rain was a steady downpour, offering no hope of cessation or diminution—a cold, uncomfortable rain, which made all the world look one dull gray.

'I never felt so shivery in my life,' said Tiny,

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with a wistful glance at an arrangement in ferns and peacocks' feathers which occupied the place of the winter logs. 'Why can't we have a fire? Why must we sit shivering just because it happens to be July?'

'I don't think the housemaids would like it,' faltered Lizzie, who had learnt from Aunt Dora to be very considerate of the servants.

'I will not have my ferns and feathers disturbed for any one,' said Horatia, who always claimed possession of any article which her hands had helped to arrange, or her mind to plan. 'I laboured for a whole day in getting up a nice effect, and I won't have the fireplace touched.'

'You laboured, indeed!' cried Tiny. 'You mean you looked on while other people worked, and then claimed the merit of the whole transaction.'

'The peacocks' feathers were my own particular idea,' protested Horatia.

'Of course. Nobody but a strong-minded creature like you would ever have brought such unlucky things into the house. I haven't had a moment's peace since you did it. My last new gown but one

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an utter failure—my crewel work at a standstill, because no fancy shop in the universe can match my wool—and—in short, everything at sixes and sevens.'

'Why not have a fire in the workroom, Tiny?' suggested Lizzie good-naturedly. 'We might all go up there for afternoon tea. It would be ever so snug and comfortable.'

The workroom was an upstairs den which had once been the schoolroom—a good-sized, airy room enough, but the repository for all the shabbiest furniture in the house. Here Lizzie worked for her Dorcas society, sometimes made a gown for herself, and often assisted the maid in altering a ball dress for the frivolous Tiny, or in making a cheap costume for the economical Horatia. It was a very comfortable room, but it was very shabby; and it had of late years been in some manner Lizzie's own particular domain.

'Thank you for the brilliant suggestion,' said Tiny. 'No, your room is very nice, no doubt, but I like rather more elegant surroundings, and as long as I am allowed to occupy the drawing-room I shall do so, even if Horatia's selfishness and your con-

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sideration for the housemaids deny me the comfort of a fire. I don't suppose we shall long enjoy the right to call any room in the Manor House our own.'

'What can you mean?' asked Lizzie, looking up laughingly from her work. 'What domestic revolution are you anticipating? Do you think Morton is going to turn the Manor House into a phalanstery or a convalescent hospital?'

'No, I believe his madness will take another turn,' answered Tiny, tilting her chair so as to command a good view of her instep, set off by the Madame Angot boot which she was to have exhibited at the garden party. 'His lunacy will take a matrimonial form.'

The malicious intention of the words was unmistakable. Lizzie's bright young face crimsoned.

'I don't think you need have any apprehension on that score. Your brother is not likely to forget Miss Courtenay for a long time to come,' she said quietly.

'Oh, if he were left to himself, I dare say he might prove a bright example of constancy, and go down to his grave a bachelor. But is it not

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Thackeray who says that any young woman may marry any young man, provided that she makes up her mind to have him? I believe Thackeray knew the seamy side of human nature too well to be mistaken.'

'Very likely,' answered Lizzie, trying to be cool and indifferent in her tone, though her cheeks were poppy-red; 'but I am not aware that any young woman has made up her mind about Morton.'

'Are you not?' cried Tiny; 'then you must be more simple than a sheep-faced Dresden shepherdess. I know who has made up her mind to have him. When a young woman foregoes rest, and sleep, and food, and comfort, to watch by a young man's sick bed—when she hangs about him in his convalescence like a mother over a sick baby, when she follows him, and flatters him, and fosters his fads and his crotchets, and openly, patently adores him before the eyes of all people—when she, by so doing, establishes a claim upon his gratitude, which culminates in cobs and carriages, don't you think the lookers-on must be very blind, and very dense, if they cannot see how the play is going to end?'

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Lizzie Hardman started to her feet, pale as death, her eyes flashing, a whole lapful of baby garments scattered on the carpet, her vigorous young frame trembling from head to foot.

'What?' she exclaimed, 'are you mean enough, base enough, vile enough, to think that, when I was doing what I knew and felt to be my duty, I was trying to worm myself into your brother's affection, in order that he might, in some weak moment, ask me to be his wife?'

'I am not going to beat about the bush, if Tiny is. That is precisely what we both think you are doing,' said Horatia.

'Then I will not live under the same roof with you another day,' cried Lizzie, gathering up the baby petticoats, and cottons, and scissors, which she had flung down in her wrath.

'Does that mean that we are to go?' said Horatia, with her strong-minded air.

'You know what it means well enough. You are the mistresses of this house, and I am a pauper dependent upon your aunt's bounty. You have made me feel that in a hundred ways, which have wounded

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my self-respect; and only your dear aunt's love, and,' —her voice faltered a little here—'Morton's kindness —have reconciled me to my position. But you have now made it unbearable. Good-bye.'

'Where are you going?'

'That is my business. I am going away from Tangley Manor,' answered Lizzie proudly, as she walked towards the door.

'What are we to do with your cob?' asked Tiny. 'Is he to be sent after you by the carrier?'

Lizzie deigned no reply to this flippant question. She had shut the door before Tiny's last sentence was ended.

The two girls looked at each other in silence for half a minute or so, with something like consternation in their faces.

Do you think she means to go?' asked Tiny.

'Of course not. She thinks she will frighten us by getting into a passion, and that we shall apologize and let her carry on her artful scheme to the end.'

'If she really were to go, you know, there would be no end of a row with Aunt Dora; and even Morton

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might be angry,' said Tiny, looking frightened, and feeling that she had gone too far.

'She won't leave Tangley, you little simpleton,' replied Horatia confidently. 'She knows a great deal too well on which side her bread is buttered.'

'There are some people who would eat their bread without butter when their pride is at stake,' mused Tiny, 'and I have a notion that Lizzie is proud, though she has contrived to keep her pride under till this afternoon.'

'She will not go,' asserted Horatia. 'I tell you, my dear, a person in her position always studies self-interest before anything. Of course she knows that Aunt Dora means to leave her decently provided for. She would not risk offending auntie. And then where is she to go, do you suppose? To her vulgar factory people at Blackford? Why, she could not endure them for an hour after having lived with us. Don't alarm yourself, Clementine. She will go to her room and sulk for the rest of the day, I dare say; and to-morrow we shall have a tearful apology.'

'I hope it will all come right,' faltered the

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cowardly Tiny. 'I have a good mind to go to her room and make it up with her.'

'If you were to degrade yourself in such a way I would never speak to you again,' exclaimed Horatia. 'Do you want old Hardman's daughter for your sister-in-law? It would come to that if you went and humbled yourself to her. If she does go it will be a very good riddance. I am not afraid of Morton, if you are, and I will bear the brunt of his displeasure when he finds his devoted nurse, and flatterer, and amanuensis missing.'

'And if she doesn't claim Paragon I shall ride him,' said Tiny. 'He will carry me beautifully.'

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CHAPTER IX.

'WHAT IS THE KEY TO THE ENIGMA?'

THERE was some trepidation in Clementine's breast when she returned to the drawing-room, after dressing for dinner, and found Dora Blake sitting at her favourite window reading the morning paper, while Morton walked up and down the open space on the other side of the room.

'Well, auntie dear, did you enjoy your day with the old fogies at Highclere?' inquired Tiny, with an attempt at her accustomed sprightliness.

'I always enjoy myself with old friends,' answered Miss Blake.

'You are such a devoted old dear. I find Sir Nathaniel dreadfully heavy in hand.'

'What has become of Lizzie?' asked Miss Blake. 'I went to her room just now and found it empty. Is she out?'

'Hardly, in such weather as this, I should think,'

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said Morton. 'Paragon is in his stable, and ready to kick it to pieces in his exuberant freshness. I have just been offering him the consolation of a bunch of clover.'

'Then where can she be?' exclaimed Miss Blake wonderingly. 'The gong will sound in a minute, and she is always a pattern of punctuality.'

The gong sounded almost immediately, but Miss Hardman did not appear. Clementine felt herself turning pale. Horatia reared her head ready for a fight. Both felt that a crisis was at hand. As they crossed the hall to the dining-room Andrew slid up to Aunt Dora, with a secret, insinuating air, and offered her a letter on a salver.

'Good heavens!' she exclaimed, 'it's from Lizzie. Whatever can the girl mean by writing to me? Is Miss Hardman upstairs?'

'No, ma'am, she went out two hours ago.'

'On foot—and in such weather?'

'She had her waterproof, ma'am, and a hand-bag.'

'A bag! Where could she be going! Some sick person must have sent for her,' said Miss Blake, opening the letter.

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'My dearest friend,—Forgive me for taking a step which I feel unavoidable. I am obliged to leave Tangley, and for ever. Pray do not suppose that my love for you is one iota the less because I feel myself compelled to live the rest of my life away from you. I shall never forget your goodness, and I hope you will let me see you as often as we can meet without inflicting trouble upon you or humiliation upon me. When I can think and write more calmly I will try to explain my conduct, but I cannot now. I feel that you will trust me well enough to be sure I shall do nothing wrong, and nothing foolish. I am going to find a home among respectable working people, the only kind of home to which I am entitled. I have one favour to ask you, and that is to tell no one at Tangley the contents of this letter.—Your always loving, always grateful

'LIZZIE.'

They had all seated themselves at the dinner-table before Aunt Dora opened her letter, and every eye had been upon her as she read. Her face was clouded over with a look of the deepest displeasure before she came to the bottom of the page, but she

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said never a word, and put the letter quietly in her pocket, as if there were nothing particular in the communication.

Morton said grace, and began to dispense the soup.

'And pray, how does Lizzie explain her mysterious disappearance?' he asked carelessly.

The indifference of his tone was reassuring to his sisters, who had been goaded to desperation by the idea that he was really falling in love with their aunt's *protégée*.

'Quite satisfactorily. She has gone to see some of her Blackford friends.'

'On foot—with a hand-bag—and at a moment's notice!' exclaimed Morton. 'What in Heaven's name could have induced her to behave in such a way?'

'No doubt there was a good reason for her conduct. She is not a person to act upon a foolish impulse. Her letter is too hurried to explain her motives, but I feel sure that what she has done was wisely done.'

'I have a good mind to go after her directly I have dined, and see what it all means,' said Morton,

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with a great deal more concern than his sisters liked. 'What is her address in Blackford?'

'She has not given me any address,' replied Aunt Dora quietly.

'No address—no explanation! The thing is incredible.'

'She promises to write me a full account of her movements shortly. Pray don't flurry yourself, Morton. Lizzie is a thoroughly sensible girl, and knows how to take care of herself.'

'If she were as wise as Minerva, I should still say that she acted foolishly to-day,' replied Morton, staring blankly at a dish of salmon cutlets, without the least idea that Andrew was waiting for him to distribute them. 'Why could she not consult me, or you, before she went off to these unknown relations? Why could she not drive to the station? Imagine her tramping to Highclere through the mud and rain with a bag on her arm! It is too absurd!'

'If you don't mean to eat any dinner yourself, Morton, you may at least let us go on with ours,' said Horatia, with subdued displeasure.

She was a young lady never wanting in the

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courage of her opinions. She was prepared to defend her treatment of Miss Hardman, should she be called upon to do so.

The dinner proceeded, but in a very uncomfortable manner. Andrew, the butler, was one of those old servants who know the family affairs almost better than the family themselves know them. His subordinate was his nephew, an honest rustic, supposed to have no more comprehension of, or interest in, passing events than if he had been a cellaret or a plate-warmer. So there was no restraint upon conversation on account of the presence of these two. Yet conversation flagged wofully. Aunt Dora looked pale and unhappy, and could hardly eat anything. The two girls indulged in brief spurts of unnatural vivacity. Morton was obviously out of temper. He neither eat nor drank, but vented his ill-humour in abuse of the dinner.

'Veal again,' he ejaculated savagely. 'Duck. None for me. Hideously indigestible. What can Vicars mean by ducks and veal? Is she going out of her mind? I cannot understand her conduct. Did she go by the omnibus, do you think?'

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'Are you talking of the cook or of Lizzie?' asked Horatia.

'Lizzie, of course. She must have caught the Austhorpe 'bus at the cross roads. Silly girl! as if she could not have gone in the brougham.'

'She might not wish to appropriate *all* the carriages,' said Tiny spitefully.

'And to leave no address! How are we to send her letters—her luggage? She must have been beside herself when she went. Auntie, can you offer any explanation of her conduct?'

'I don't think we need discuss it at this moment,' answered Miss Blake quietly, feeling that this one particular subject should be kept sacred even from the confidential Andrew.

Morton pished and pshawed, and flung himself back in his chair, turning a stony eye upon the tart and pudding which were offered him, and refusing to be comforted with salad or cheese-straws. Clementine nibbled her cheese-straw, and trifled with her glass of claret, just as if dinner were going on in the most cheerful manner; and to Morton's impatience it seemed an hour or so before Andrew had solemnly

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scraped up the last crumb in his silver shovel, and had reconciled his mind to the necessity of leaving the room. At last, however, he was gone, and the family were alone at the festive board, where the decanters and Derby fruit dishes reflected themselves in the shining oak, just as they had done when Geoffrey Blake first dined in his new house. Morton leant with folded arms on the table, and looked straight across at his aunt.

'Now,' he said decidedly, 'the servants are gone, and we can have this matter out. What is the key to the enigma? Lizzie would never dream of leaving this house in such a manner without some powerful motive. What is that motive? Has she been summoned to some relative's death-bed? Has she been called away to nurse some one?'

'Her letter does not say so.'

'What other reason can she possibly have? Please let me see her letter.'

'I don't think I should be justified in showing you the letter. It is written hurriedly, and with evident agitation, and was intended for my eye alone.'

'Do you think I shall find fault with the spelling,

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or because the I's are not dotted?' asked Morton, with an angry laugh. 'I have a right to see that letter.'

'I really cannot recognise that right, Morton, answered Dora Blake, with just the faintest ray of pleasure in her countenance, which till this moment had been full of care. 'Lizzie is all the world to me, but she can be very little to you; although you have been good enough to give her the shelter of your roof, just as you would have done had she been a pet dog of mine.'

'What nonsense you talk!' cried Morton, jumping up from his chair. 'I have no patience with such absurdity. She is a great deal to me—my adopted sister, my companion, my true and faithful friend! Very little to me, indeed! Why, she has been my right hand for the last three months. I shall hardly know what to do with myself without her.'

Tiny and Horatia looked at each other across the table, the elder red, the younger pale, with vexation. Their worst fears were confirmed. That ridiculous gift of cob and carriage was only the forerunner of other more fateful offerings; their brother's heart, hand, and fortune.

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Horatia took up the gauntlet.

'One might think you might contrive to exist without an adopted sister, when Providence has blest you with two actual sisters, who are just sufficiently well educated to read aloud and write from dictation,' she said with an injured air.

'But neither of which sisters would put herself out of the way for the space of one summer morning to oblige me,' answered Morton.

'Because a real sister has no motive for such toad-eating,' cried Clementine, bristling with offended dignity. 'Because a real sister has no end to gain by flattery and servility. I dare say if I were a penniless dependent like Lizzie Hardman I might be capable of just as much meanness, in the hope of getting a rich husband, though I'm sure I should hate myself for it.'

Morton's eyes flashed honest indignation at his sister, as he listened to her viperish speech.

'I think I can understand now why Lizzie went off all in a hurry,' he exclaimed. 'The letter, please, Aunt Dora.'

He had walked round the table, and was standing

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by his aunt's side holding out his hand for the letter, with an authoritative air. She gave it him without a word.

'There is not a syllable about a summons from her Blackford friends,' he said when he had slowly read the letter. 'And she talks about leaving Tangley for ever. She could only have come to such a decision because she was wretched here. And a week ago she was the gayest and brightest of us all —full of life and spirits, as happy as the day was long. Had she any quarrel with you, auntie?'

'Quarrel with me! Why, the dear child never displeased me in her life. She is all that is good.'

'And yet deserts you at a moment's notice. That seems extraordinary.'

'But I think your sisters may be able to explain it,' said Dora.

'I think so too,' said Morton, glancing angrily at Clementine. 'I left you both in the drawing-room with Lizzie after luncheon. You must know what put into her head to go off in this way.'

'I only know that she got into a furious passion at something that Horrie or I said to her—mere

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chaff—and bounced out of the room like a termagant,' answered Tiny, with an innocent air.

'She is usually so good-tempered. Surely chaff, as you elegantly call it, could never have provoked her into leaving Aunt Dora.'

'She is very sweet-tempered to you,' said Horatia, 'but she is not quite so amiable to us.'

'How dare you say anything so unjust and untrue, Horatia?' exclaimed Miss Blake. 'I know how Lizzie has borne with you both.'

'Oh, then there has been need of forbearance on Lizzie's part?' Morton inquired, determined to sift this social mystery to the bottom.

'I know that Lizzie has been made to feel her dependent position here ever since she was old enough to be sensitive,' said Aunt Dora.

'Then my sisters have been very despicable,' cried Morton indignantly. 'Dependent, indeed! When she has been the most valuable person in the house—after you, Aunt Dora. Valuable in the house, and out of it—the mainspring of other people's comfort. And that she should be tyrannized over by two young ladies who have not an unselfish thought,

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whose rule of life is the indulgence of their own whims! It is shameful; and I am ashamed of having such sisters.'

The two girls rose simultaneously, as if they had been moved by the same clockwork.

'I think it is we who ought to have gone away,' exclaimed Horatia. 'Evidently we are not wanted here, and the sooner we find another home the better. It is fortunate for us that papa has left us incomes which at least make us independent. I suppose even we may be allowed the use of the brougham to drive us to Highclere to-morrow morning.'

'You can make fools of yourselves in any manner most agreeable to you,' answered Morton coolly, as he went out through one of the French windows that opened on to the lawn.

He had never been more angry; he had hardly ever been more agitated. His sense of right and justice was outraged by the thing that had been done. It galled him to think that he had two such vulgar young women for his sisters.

'I suppose it is an innate caddishness which must

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come out somewhere,' he said to himself in bitterness of spirit. 'The taint of the gutter—the original sin of low birth.'

And then he thought of Lizzie, his faithful nurse, his sympathizing companion, the only woman who had entered into all his plans and understood his views. Dulcie had been very fond of him as a lover; but she had not cared a jot about him as a political economist. Cultured, well read as she was in the whole range of elegant and imaginative literature, she was horribly uninformed about the needs and the sufferings of mankind, the government of the land in which she lived. She considered political economy as a dry-as-dust something outside the circle of her life and thoughts, like logarithms, or Sanscrit; and she had always yawned a little when her lover expounded his philanthropic theories.

Lizzie had shown herself so intelligent—not pretending an interest, but really feeling it,—helping him with ideas as well as with sympathy; telling him without scruple the weak points in his schemes, the flaws in his arguments. She had forced him to respect her as well as to be grateful to her. And now she had

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been driven out of his house, goaded to desperation by the malicious speech of two unmannerly girls.

So great a wrong was not to be permitted. It must be set right, somehow, and immediately. He roamed about the garden for half an hour, feeling that he could hardly endure existence in the house that held his vixenish sisters; and he wasted half an hour in the stable, devoting the greater part of the time to fondling the cob, who had been bedded down for the night, and stood up to his knees in golden straw. It was striking nine when Morton went slowly back to the house, where the lamps had only just been taken into the sitting-rooms.

He did not go to the drawing-room, but to his Aunt Dora's room, feeling that she was likely to prefer solitude to the society of her nieces. His instinct had not misled him. Miss Blake was at her davenport, writing in the soft light of her shaded lamp.

'Auntie, what are you going to do about Lizzie?' asked Morton, seating himself near his aunt, and coming to the point at once.

'I am at this moment writing to her uncle, Joseph

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Hardman. I fancy she must have gone to his house. I can think of no other place to which she could go.'

'What is Joseph Hardman?'

'A mechanic. He is employed at a foundry, I believe. Lizzie's two sisters were brought up by his wife, and her brother lives with his uncle too. I believe that Lizzie, in her quiet, unobtrusive way, has always been very good to her uncle and his wife, as well as to her brother and sisters.'

Morton looked at his watch.

'It would be too late to telegraph, even if I were to ride to Highclere on the fastest horse in the stable,' he said, with a sigh.

'Ever so much too late. But the letter will do as well as a telegram. There is no need for desperate hurry. Lizzie is such a thoroughly sensible girl that she is sure to manage her life properly, even away from us.'

'But there is need for hurry,' cried Morton impetuously. 'She must not think that you and I consent to her leaving Tangley. Not for a day, not for an hour, longer than can be helped. She must not be allowed to suppose that she has been turned

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out of doors—my poor Lizzie—the gentlest, most self-denying creature.'

He was almost unmanned at the thought of how badly she had been treated, and his eyes were moist as he started up from his chair and began to pace the room.

'Have you the remotest notion of what it is my sisters dislike in her—or why they have treated her so infamously?' he asked presently.

'"Infamously" is rather too strong a word,' said his aunt, smiling at his vehemence. 'They have never been particularly kind to her, and they have always taken pains to let her feel the distinction between her position and their own, in spite of all I could do to bring them up on a perfectly equal footing. Perhaps they have resented my affection for her, though Heaven knows my heart is big enough to hold all three. Since your illness I think they have been inclined to be jealous of your regard for her, and to fancy that you prefer her to them.'

'I do, infinitely,' said Morton. 'She is worth a shipload of such girls. She is one in a thousand.

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Next to Dulcie she is the sweetest woman I ever met. But why should they be jealous of a girl whom I regard as an adopted sister?'

Miss Blake's heart, which had glowed with triumph at the beginning of Morton's speech, was somewhat chilled by the conclusion.

'Your gift of the carriage——' she began.

'Surely they are not mean enough to grudge her that. I remember Clementine went on about the cob in a very ridiculous way, but I thought that was only her fun.'

'I fancy it was just such fun as that which drove Lizzie out of the house. A high-spirited, sensitive girl would hardly stay in any man's house if she were accused of setting her cap at him,' answered Aunt Dora, with eyes bent watchfully on her nephew's perturbed countenance.

'Setting her cap at me! Too ridiculous!' ejaculated Morton. 'Why, everybody who knows anything about me must know that I have done with all matrimonial schemes—that courtship and marriage are a closed volume in the book of my life.'

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'A young man does sometimes—once in a century or so—get cured of such a sorrow as yours, Morton, and find perfect happiness where he least thought to win it.'

'I am not that kind of man, and Lizzie knows it. I have talked more freely to her than to any one else. I have treated her more like a brother than a sister. It is utterly shameful and wicked if those girls have teased her with insinuations of that kind. There is not the slightest ground for them either in her conduct or mine.'

'I know that,' admitted Aunt Dora meekly.

'However, I shall go to Blackford to-morrow, and find out this Joseph Hardman's house, and bring Lizzie home with me.'

'Don't you think that by such an act you might give your sisters some ground for their suspicions?' asked his aunt.

'What do I care for their suspicions?'

'Or might you not even compromise Lizzie in the minds of other people? You know your own feelings, and that she can never be more to you than an adopted sister. But other peeple will insist upon

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having their own ideas, and on disseminating them. Had you not better let me fetch Lizzie from Blackford?'

'Yes, that would be better. Lizzie would like that better, no doubt. I had that plan in my mind when I came in just now. If you will go to-morrow, dearest auntie, and insist on her coming home with you immediately, I shall be eternally grateful.'

He gave his aunt a most affectionate hug, by way of earnest.

'My dear Morton, there is no occasion for gratitude,' she said, smiling up at him in the lamplight. 'I am much more anxious to have Lizzie home than you can possibly be. It is very kind of you to be so warmly interested in her welfare.'

'I should be a brute if I could feel less warmly, after all her goodness to me,' replied Morton.

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CHAPTER X.

A LAND OF CHIMNIES AND SMOKE.

LIZZIE turned her back upon Tangley Manor that rainy July afternoon with a heavy heart. Pride gave her a kind of spurious force. She had always been a girl of resolute will, able to conquer difficulties, to set a curb upon feeling, to achieve and to endure; but never in the past had she so much needed courage and determination as she needed them to-day. She had made up her mind that to remain another day in Morton Blake's house would be to sacrifice womanly honour and self-respect. She had been openly charged, in the grossest words, with scheming to win him for her husband. Her only justification, in the eyes of these insolent girls, her only possible assertion of her own dignity, lay in immediate departure—in putting herself out of Morton's reach for the rest of her life.

'Or at any rate till I am old and gray,' she said

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to herself, as she put on her neat little felt hat, and comfortable waterproof Ulster. 'Perhaps thirty or forty years hence, when I have fought my way through this difficult world, and gained a decent position by my own labour, I may feel justified in seeking him out, and asking him to take up the thread of our broken friendship. He will be famous by that time, I hope; a Cabinet Minister, the saviour of his country, perhaps. Oh, how proud I should be of his reputation, even when my feelings were blunted by age and hard work!'

Her nerves were strung to their utmost tension, her brain was in that excited state in which vivid thoughts and fancies follow each other in swiftest succession.

'Poor Morton,' she thought, with a sigh, as she paused absently in the task of packing her travelling bag, 'I believe he will miss me a little.'

If it was painful to think of leaving Morton, how much more bitter must be the thought of leaving her friend and protectress, the woman who had given her all a mother's love and thoughtful care, all a sister's sympathy and companionship. Lizzie dared

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not let her mind dwell upon the idea of separation from Aunt Dora. She sustained herself with the hope that their parting need not be life-long. They might meet and be together at times and seasons It was only her severance from Morton which must be lasting.

'Not for the world would I let those cruel girls think that I was acting a part—that I was only playing at going away,' she said to herself. 'I must act in such a way as to make them know and feel that I am thorough.'

Even in her flurry and confusion of mind she was able to think rationally of the plan of her future life. She had received her quarter's allowance from Miss Blake only a few days ago, and she had the whole amount in hand—five-and-twenty pounds. With that sum in her pocket she felt equal to finance the situation until she could find some kind of remunerative employment for her head or her hands. Without either arrogance or vanity she knew that she was clever with both hands and head.

It was an unknown thing for her to be setting out on a journey alone, and it was with a strange and

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desolate feeling that she stood at the cross roads, bag and umbrella in hand, waiting till the omnibus from Austhorpe should come blundering and creaking along the muddy lane, and heave-to under the sign-post yonder, the coachman pulling up his horse with a sudden clutch of the reins, astonished at the unwonted spectacle of a passenger. Yes, it was strange and dreary to be alone; but lovingly as she had leaned on Aunt Dora in the past, Lizzie Hardman had learned long ago to think and work for herself, and she had a brave, independent spirit.

'I had rather bear separation from all I love than be thought capable of meanness,' she said to herself.

A jolting half-hour's progress in the mouldy little omnibus, which smelt of poultry yard and stable; and then she found herself at the Highclere station, an unlovely building, offering nothing cheering for the eye to rest upon save the pictured presentment of a newly developed watering-place, unknown to the mind of man, but provided with a bay of golden sand, a crescent of Italian villas, a squadron of gaily painted bathing machines, emerald verdure on the very edge of the beach, and sky and sea of sapphire hue. It

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remained for the adventurous spirit who tried this happy hunting-ground to discover that the Italian villas were still in skeleton, while the existing settlement was a squalid fishing village; that the drainage was a disgrace to a civilized community, the golden sand a snare, and the sapphire sea a delusion.

Lizzie Hardman looked at the vivid attractions of St. Clement on the Ouse without seeing them; and then she walked up and down the dismal little platform, and wished that the Austhorpe omnibus had not been so over-considerate in giving its passengers a wide margin of leisure before the starting of the train. But the bell rang at last, and with the help of a friendly porter, Lizzie found a comfortable corner in a second-class carriage. She had always travelled first-class hitherto, but she began her new life in the economic manner in which she would be obliged to continue it.

'I ought to have gone third-class,' she said to herself, as she counted the change out of half a sovereign, and found that her ticket had cost her two and tenpence, 'but I have never been accustomed to

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sitting with dirty people. I shall have to educate myself down to my altered circumstances. Perhaps, after all, when I have once got over the pain of parting from those I love, I may be happier as a lonely waif fighting my way in the world than I could ever have been as a dependent in Morton's house. Oh those girls! how they have made me suffer!'

She looked back at her life during the last four years, since she and Morton's sisters had grown to womanhood; and she almost wondered at herself for her patient endurance of all the petty slights and deliberate snubs that Clementine and Horatia had inflicted upon her.

'I hope I am not mean-spirited for having borne it all so tamely,' she thought. 'But no, I had auntie's love to make up for all their unkindness. It was auntie's pleasure I had to study. To have resented such small injuries would have been only temper and false pride. They never insulted me until to-day.'

She sat looking out of the window at a country which was altogether new to her. She had never been at Blackford since her infancy. Aunt Dora had

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thought it well to make the severance between Lizzie and her brother and sisters as complete as possible. She was to occupy a different place in the world. By-and-by, after her adopted mother's death, when she should find herself amply provided for, she might be as bountiful as she liked to her family, but she could never be one of them. Education, surroundings, associations, would make a gulf between them. There was no pride or hardness in Dora Blake's nature, but she felt that half-measures here would be a mistake.

'You must not think me unkind, darling,' she said one day, when Lizzie had asked permission to go to Blackford and see her brother and sisters, who wrote her such nice letters in a copperplate hand, with very few faults in spelling, and who were always so prettily grateful for her presents; 'but when I took you for my adopted daughter I told your poor father that you were to belong to me entirely, that my relations were to be your relations, that you were to be a Blake and not a Hardman, and that I should hold myself responsible for your prosperity and happiness in life. She can never be more

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than a friend at a distance to her brothers and sisters, I told him. Your father was quite willing that it should be so. He told me that he gave you to me as a free gift, for the love of his father's bosom friend and companion, Geoffrey Blake, and that you should be as much my own property as if you were a little negro girl bought in an African market-place.'

Lizzie had obeyed her adopted mother, submitting to be guided by her superior wisdom, yet not without regret for the brothers and sisters who were never to have any intimate share in her life. All the kindness that it was in her power to show them she had freely given, and her letters had been full of affection for the kindred whose faces she had never seen.

Thus it was that the country between Highclere and Blackford was new to her, and she watched the passing landscape with curious eyes. For some time the scenery was purely pastoral, low-lying meadows, meandering streams, a wooded hill-side in the far distance, water-mills, sleepy villages, all the poetry of rustic life. Then the whole character of the scene changed all at once, and Lizzie beheld a district which was to her as a new world, a sudden

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revelation of ugliness under a smoke-tarnished sky. Brickfields, chemical works, tall chimney shafts, gas works, bone-burning works, all the hideousness of a manufacturing neighbourhood. But worst of all was the baneful atmosphere, tainted with all the variety of nauseous odours, dull with smoke, oppressive to the lungs, depressing to the spirits, thick and slab like the witches' gruel; an atmosphere in which hope and joy must surely drop their wings and expire like a pigeon in an exhausted receiver.

And now the open wastes, the brickfields were all gone, and the train was panting its slow way over the crowded house-tops of a dingy city; and now it was in the smoke-begrimed terminus, doors were slamming, porters shouting, and Lizzie Hardman knew she had reached her destination.

Having nothing but her bag to carry she would not indulge in the luxury of a cab. She had never been in London or any really large town, her travels having been confined to sundry excursions to pretty sea-side places, and to the English lakes, with Aunt Dora. She had therefore no idea of distances, and fancied that her Uncle Joseph's house could not be far off.

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She asked a porter to direct her to Milton Street.

'That will be in the Potteries,' answered the man. 'It's a longish way. Hadn't you better have a fly?'

'No, thank you, I am a good walker.'

The man directed her. It sounded a long way, and after she had come to the Ultima Thule of his direction she was to inquire of somebody else, who would instruct her in the rest of the way.

The rain was over, the sun was setting—a magnificent sunset in the country, no doubt, but here only a lurid patch of red gleaming athwart a bank of lowering cloud. Lizzie walked briskly down a long, smoky street, where shabby shops and shabbier private houses alternated, and where the dirtiest children her eye had ever beheld were at play in the gutters. Her soul sank within her at the foulness, the unlovely sights which greeted her on every side; and as she trudged bravely along, following the porter's direction, now passing the blackened wall of a factory, now walking beside the slate-coloured water of a canal, she kept repeating wildly with maddening iteration, and to the beat of her own footsteps,—

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'God made the country and man made the town.'

It was a weary way to the district known as the Potteries, which seemed to have been so christened for no particular reason save the whim of the builder, inasmuch as there were no potters in the place. To Lizzie it seemed the longest walk she had ever taken in the whole course of her life, and yet her light footsteps had carried her many a mile by lane and meadow, by heath and hill. The narrow, monotonous streets seemed interminable; of the factories and iron-works, the bone-burning and the soap-boiling, there appeared no end. Lizzie fancied she must have been travelling through that dull gray world for hours when a foundry clock struck the third quarter after eight, and she knew that it was only three-quarters of an hour since she had left the terminus.

And now she was at the end of her journey. This was Milton Street, in the Potteries—evidently a new district—a raw, bare-looking street, tolerably wide, tolerably clean and tidy, but hideously flat and monotonous, never a porch, or verandah, or jutting window to diversify the plain brick fronts of the

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square eight-roomed houses; never a flowering creeper to beautify the dull brickwork.

Lizzie knocked at the door of twenty-seven, her Uncle Joseph's number. Her heart beat hard and fast as she stood waiting for admission. How would her kindred receive her? Would they be warm and loving to her in her desolation? Would they reproach her for having kept herself aloof from them in the past? It was a painful ordeal, to meet those of her own flesh and blood, so near, and yet so distant—strangers whose faces she had never seen within her memory —sisters who had been nestled in the same motherly bosom.

'I hope they will love me a little in spite of everything,' she said to herself.

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CHAPTER XI.

FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT.

WITHIN ten days of that balmy summer afternoon on which Morton Blake had sat beside Mrs. Green's death-bed and heard from dying lips the story of the past, the church bell was tolling heavily upon the sultry July air, and a modest funeral train was slowly winding its way across the level fields to the old churchyard. They were taking poor, tired-out Lucy to her last rest. The widower led the little procession, serious for once in his useless, frivolous life, holding sad, sensible Mattie by the hand, the girl grave with the sense of new responsibilities, but tearless, though her pallid cheeks bore the traces of many tears. The little ones followed, stumbling over the clover and sorrel bloom, looking about them with vague wonder, as if surprised to see the flowers so bright and the sky so blue while poor mammy was

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being carried to the black, ugly pit-hole, of the nature of which last resting-place they had derived somewhat pagan views from the conversation of the small servant-maid. And lastly, with the youngest girl's chubby hand in hers, came Dulcie, robed in black, with sweet, mournful face and downcast eyes.

Mr. Haldimond started a little when he saw Dulcie in the group of humble mourners. His heart thrilled at this latest proof of her tenderness, her sympathy with all human sorrow. This was true Christianity, an unconscious imitation of the Divine Master, who never turned from human sorrow, who was never deaf to the mourner's cry.

'What a lovely world this would be if all women were of her mould!' he thought. 'Death would, indeed, lose its sting, sorrow would be tempered with joy.'

Later, when they were standing by the open grave, and the clods of clay fell with dismal sound upon the coffin lid, poor Mattie's fortitude suddenly gave way. She flung herself down by the edge of the grave, with a shrill, despairing cry—'Mother! mother!'

Then Dulcie gently raised her from the ground

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and held her in her arms, the streaming eyes hidden on her shoulder, till the last sad words had been spoken, when she drew the sobbing girl away, keeping her arm round her while they walked slowly to the gate.

'Oh, let me stop, let me stop!' cried Mattie. 'I am not going to leave her there,—all—alone.'

'Dear child, she is not there, she is not alone. She is in Paradise with the happy souls that rest from their labours, waiting for the coming of their God. You know she is not there, Mattie. You know that the soul cannot die, that if you do your duty here you will see her and be happy with her in heaven.'

'Yes, I know, I know,' sobbed Mattie. 'I try to believe—but it is very hard—after having seen her in her coffin—not to remember that she is lying there—in that dark hole. Please, please, Miss Courtenay, let me go back and sit beside her for a little while.'

'Not to-day, dear. We will both go to-morrow, and take some flowers for her grave. You must come home with me now.'

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'Hadn't I better go with the little ones, if I mustn't go with her?'

'No, dear, your father will take care of them. —Mr. Green, will you let Mattie go home with me for an hour or two?'

'Oh, Miss Courtenay, I'm proud for you to notice her,' said the impressionable musician, with tears in his eyes.

So Dulcie led Mattie across the fields to Fairview, comforting her with sweet, hopeful words as they went along. Once Mattie embarrassed her by a sudden question.

'Yes, miss, I know what you are telling me is all true—but, if it was your father who was lying in that grave, do you think the thought of seeing him in heaven—after years and years—when you are an old woman, would make up to you for the loss of him now?'

'Not just at first, perhaps, Mattie. But I think the hope would grow brighter and stronger every day—if I could believe that my father were sure of heaven,' added Dulcie, in a low voice.

'Oh, Miss Courtenay, a gentleman like your

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Papa would never do anything wrong,' protested Mattie, with conviction, almost as if she would have said, 'Of such is the kingdom of heaven.'

They went into Dulcie's morning-room, where the sun was shining through the stained glass in the old Tudor window, and where the octagon table stood ready with tea-things, and cakes, and strawberries in white china baskets. Never had Mattie's eyes beheld such a table—a feast so delicately tempting, yet so arcadian in its simplicity. The brightness of the room, with its variety of colour, dazzled the girl's eyes. She forgot even her grief in her wonder at this glimpse of an unknown world, the world of wealth and taste.

Dulcie made her little friend sit down in one of the low basket chairs, by a tiny tea-table, and then she waited upon her, and petted her, and coaxed her to eat a few strawberries, and to drink a refreshing cup of tea. While she was kneeling at Mattie's side, tempting her languid appetite with pound cake and big strawberries, Scroope opened the door and ushered in Mr. Haldimond.

Dulcie started to her feet instantly, and seated

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herself somewhat shyly at the tea-table, her cheeks dyed with unnecessary blushes.

'I have come to beg a cup of tea,' said Mr. Haldimond, 'and to have a chat with Sir Everard, if he is at home.'

'He is at home. But I am taking tea an hour earlier than usual, on Mattie's account. Will you go to papa's study for your talk?'

'Yes, when you have given me some tea. Well, Mattie, Miss Blake tells me you are going to stay at Austhorpe with us, and that you hope some day to be mistress at our school.'

Mattie smiled faintly at this idea, which seemed to her to suggest the wildest ambition.

'Miss Blake has been very kind to us,' she said. She is going to let us keep the cottage, and we are all to live here instead of going back to poor father, and she will call every day to look after us till I am old enough to take care of the little ones quite by myself.'

'Are you glad to stay here?'

'Very, very glad. Father will come to see us once a month. He says he would come oftener, but he can't afford the railway fare, you know. He is

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to bring Miss Blake as much money as he can, to pay for our food and different things, and she will make up what is wanted.'

'Don't worry yourself about money matters, Mattie. They will be made easy to you,' said Dulcie, looking lovingly at the serious little face, so aged by premature knowledge and premature care.

Mr. Haldimond stayed with them for nearly an hour, cheering Mattie by his kindness, and exercising as soothing an influence upon Dulcie's spirits, though she would scarcely have owned as much. An indescribable sense of peace stole over her mind as she sat by the open window, looking idly across the rich summer landscape, and listening to Arthur Haldimond's voice as he talked of his day's experiences in and about Austhorpe. He spent the greater part of every day in visiting among his parishioners, most thoroughly fulfilling the promise of his first sermon that he would be one with them in their griefs and in their joys. He kept his evenings only for his books, which were the delight of his life.

At last he rose, very reluctantly, and wished Dulcie good-bye.

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'I may not see you when I leave your father,' he said; and though she was longing to ask him to come back to the morning-room when his business in the study was over, she had not courage to utter the simple request that would have ensured his return.

'There must be something formidable about him, though he is so kind,' she thought, 'for I cannot help feeling afraid of him.'

She had seen him several times since their meeting in Mattie's chamber, but he had never troubled her by the slightest allusion to their conversation that day.

He had been so completely at his ease with her, so calmly kind, that she found it difficult to believe that this was the same man who had so passionately declared his love. His perfect tranquility of manner reassured her, and though she could not feel quite at her ease in his presence, she had no fear of his troubling her peace by pressing his suit any further.

'I hope he will always be my friend,' she said to herself; 'I would not forfeit his friendship for the world.'

Mr. Haldimond found Sir Everard in his book-

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room. He was sitting at his writing-table in front of the open window. Books and papers were before him, but he was utterly idle, looking out at the landscape over which the yellow light was changing to the softer hues of evening. He held out his hand to Arthur Haldimond without a word. A curious friendship had grown up between the two men. The elder seemed to lean upon the younger as upon a favourite son. Sir Everard, the proud, solitary man, who in twenty years had not made a single friend, had given friendship and confidence without stint to the new-comer. But there are men of rare qualities of mind and heart who have a magnetic power in winning friendship; and it may be that Arthur Haldimond was one of these.

'You are not looking well, Sir Everard,' he said gently, as he slipped into a chair by the baronet's side.

'I am not well. I am never likely to be well. Don't lest us waste words upon my wretched health.'

'But I will talk about it. I think you are using yourself very cruelly. You ought to be

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driving about the country with Miss Courtenay, or basking in the sunshine on the lawn. But you shut yourself in this room, and brood over your books from morning till midnight.'

'I have no wish to lengthen my days.'

'Not for your daughter's sake?'

'Not even for Dulcie's sake. We have drifted far apart of late. I am no longer necessary to her happiness. She will be happier, more at peace, when I am gone.'

'She loves you with all her strength. For her sake life ought to be dear to you. Oh, Sir Everard, I think you must have read my heart before now. You must feel that I could not have been so often in your daughter's society without learning to love her. She has grown dearer to me than anything else in life, except duty. I am a poor man, entirely dependent on a profession that may not give me more than bread and cheese till my hair is gray, and Dulcie is an heiress; yet I am so sure of my power to make her happy, to guard her from all care and sorrow, to make life bright and fair, and full of meaning for her, that I am not

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ashamed to ask you to help me to win her. I am not afraid to offer myself as your son-in-law.'

Sir Everard remained silent for some minutes, with his head sunk upon his breast, in earnest thought.

'I should like you to marry her,' he said at last, with deliberation. 'There was a time when I had what people call higher views. I wanted my dear one to be the future Countess of Blatchmardean. Beville is a fine, frank, open-hearted fellow, and I believe he would have made her a good husband. But that is hopeless. She doesn't care a straw about him, and she never will. He is just one of those excellent, generous-hearted young men who never can win a woman's love. If he were a plausible scoundrel he might have a better chance. But you—yes, you would make her happy. You would be staunch and true. You would love and honour her to the end of your life or hers, for her own sake. Do not speak of her fortune. The thought of that has no influence upon me. Wealth has never given me happiness,

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and it could never of itself make her happy. But you and she together would use money as a means of happiness for many. Yes, she would be happy with you, I believe, Haldimond, if the respect she now feels for you could ever deepen into love. Let her tell me that she loves you, and you may marry her as soon afterwards as you like. My most urgent prayer is to see her happily married before I die.'

'I thank you with all my soul,' cried Arthur Haldimond, grasping Sir Everard's hand; 'you are the noblest, the most generous-minded of men.'

'Do not thank me till you know more. As my daughter's future husband—for I believe you may win her if you try—there is a page of my history that you ought to know. Be so good as to see that the door is closed, and then come back to your chair. I will tell you what I mean.'

The two men were closeted till the gong sounded for dinner, Dulcie wondering what had kept her father's guest so long. They did not dine till eight o'clock at this time of the year, so as to get the

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most enjoyment out of the summer weather. The gong had sounded for nearly ten minutes when Sir Everard and Arthur Haldimond came into the morning-room, where Dulcie was sitting in a despondent attitude before the piano, one hand resting idly on the keys, the other supporting her drooping head.

'Dulcie, take Mr. Haldimond's arm,' said her father, 'he is going to spend the evening with us.'

She started up with a brightening face, and obeyed her father without a word. Mr. Haldimond saw the lovely change in her countenance, and his heart glowed at the thought that she was pleased and cheered by his reappearance. There had certainly been a little look of regret in her soft blue eyes when he wished her good-bye.

'Oh, Dulcie, Dulcie, it is well for you to submit to Fate,' he said to himself as they crossed the hall, 'for I mean you to be mine.'

It was long since there had been such a happy dinner for Dulcie; yet Mr. Haldimond was grave and even absent in his manner, as if his

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mind was overcrowded with thought; and her father was no brighter than usual. The joy and peace in Dulcie's heart had arisen within her in some mysterious way. She knew not from what source this new sense of gladness came; but she could not hide from herself that she was glad. She looked across the table shyly, and met the curate's earnest gaze, and her drooping eyelids hardly dared to lift themselves during the rest of the meal. Yet it seemed to her as if the warmth of that dark glance were on her, like sunlight, all the time, filling her heart with the rapture of life's summer.

After dinner they went back to the morning-room, and Dulcie was glad to take refuge at her piano. How tremulously her fingers touched the first notes of that favourite nocturne!—then how the passion of the music added new force to this strange new gladness in her own soul! till every note seemed to vibrate within her, as if the melody were the very breath of her life—an emanation of her own mind.

The room was dimly lighted by two lamps

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under velvet shades—just as much light as made darkness visible. Dulcie played on, believing that her father was still seated yonder in his low arm-chair by the wide tiled hearth, where a group of choice ferns replaced the winter logs. She had scarcely lifted her eyes from the notes since she had placed herself at the piano.

But presently, while her hands were gliding over the keys in a slow legato movement, Mr. Haldimond seated himself at her side, and laid his hand upon hers. She looked up, startled and blushing, and saw that her father's chair was empty, and that she and Arthur Haldimond were alone.

'Dulcie, my darling, you are playing exquisitely; but for me to-night there is more music in your voice than in all Chopin ever wrote. My dearest love, look up. I have been talking to your father, and he has given me leave to win you, if I can; and I mean to do it. He has done more than that. He has told me that it will make him happy to see you my wife.'

'He can say that!' cried Dulcie, shuddering away from the arm that would have drawn her

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to her lover's breast. 'My father can ask any honourable man to marry his daughter—knowing what he knows—what I know——'

'My dearest, he has confided in me—he has told me all.'

'All?'

'Yes, he has told me the dark secret of his life—and I am deeply sorry for him.'

'Sorry for him?—yes, one cannot help being sorry for him. What must I feel, who have loved him and been loved by him all these years? But will God have compassion upon him, as we have? Can his sin find pardon?'

'It can, it will. If he is sincerely penitent, as I believe he is, God will assuredly pardon.'

'But to let that innocent man suffer—was not that a terrible sin?'

'It was a sin, but I do not believe your father would have let his life be sacrificed had there been no commutation of his sentence. Remember, the penalty Vargas actually paid was only the just punishment of his actual guilt.'

'How good you are! What a load you have

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taken off my mind!' said Dulcie. 'Yes, I know he is penitent. Twenty years of sorrow! That is a long atonement, is it not?'

'God will accept that atonement, love.'

'Oh, to think that, to believe that, after all I have suffered for the last few months,' said Dulcie. 'It is like coming from darkness into light.'

'And, Dulcie, my beloved, are you going to leave me in darkness? This world would be very dark for me without you. My dearest, is my case hopeless? I fancied to-night that I saw a ray of hope in your eyes.'

Her eyelids were lowered obstinately, while her left hand strayed idly over the keys, lightly touching the melody she had just been playing.

Arthur Haldimond put his arm round her waist and drew her head upon his shoulder unreproved. It nestled there as if it had found its most natural shelter.

'Dulcie, does this mean that I am to be happier than I ever pictured to myself in my wildest dreams?'

'It means that I love you dearly,' faltered

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Dulcie, 'though I hate myself for being so horribly fickle. Are you not afraid of marrying such a weathercock?'

'I fear nothing but my own unworthiness. Dulcie, you have made me unutterably happy.'

'Please don't despise me,' she murmured softly, 'but I'm afraid I love you better than ever I loved Morton.'

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CHAPTER XII.

IN THE BOSOM OF HER FAMILY.

NUMBER twenty-five was the only house which in some wise broke the monotony of Milton Street in the Potteries. It was a house of an original character, inasmuch as it had no ground-floor. Where the parlour floor and basement should have been there was an archway leading into a builder's yard. The street door opened on a space just large enough to accommodate the door-mat, and give standing-room to the person who entered. Beyond there rose with startling abruptness a steep flight of uncarpeted wooden stairs.

A pretty-looking girl, with an honest face, opened the door in answer to Lizzie's knock. She was dressed in a well-worn stuff gown, of one of those neutral and sternly æsthetic hues which high art has

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provided for even the humblest wearers. But in spite of high art it was a very ugly gown, and assuredly the vivid puce or grassy green whereat modern taste shudders would have been more cheerful to look upon in the dull Blackford atmosphere.

The breast of the young woman's gown was embroidered with a varied selection of pins and needles, the latter with threads hanging to them, and she had that worn, worried look which is apt to be produced by a prolonged application to needle-work.

Lizzie felt that this must be her dressmaking sister, but the words she wanted to say died upon her lips somehow, and she stood looking at the girl dumbly, not knowing how to begin.

'Is Mrs. Hardman at home?' she faltered at last.

'Yes, aunt's upstairs. Did you want to see her?'

'I think you must be Jessie,' said Lizzie, taking the girl's hand.

'That's my name,' answered Jessie, withdrawing her hand, and looking sharply at the stranger, whom

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she began to suspect as a person of weak intellect, or perhaps a lunatic. 'What's your business, please, miss?'

'Oh, Jessie, can't you guess who I am? Your sister, your own sister Lizzie!'

'Lor!' cried Jessie, giving her an impulsive hug. 'Lizzie! my gracious me!' she shrieked, almost hysterically. 'And you've come to see us at last, after all these years. Aunt said you never would—you was far too proud; but I said you would, whenever you got the chance; and you have. Ain't I glad! Won't I crow over aunt!' Here the vivacious Jessie snapped her fingers, in mingled derision and delight.

'Lor, how glad I am!' she exclaimed again, and Lizzie felt that, although vulgar, the girl was delightfully affectionate.

'Come upstairs, Liz, and have tea or something. How pale and fagged you look! You gave me such a scare just now. I thought you had a wild way with you, and that you weren't right in the upper story,—a loose slate, you know, as brother Bill calls it.'

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When a brother's name is William, need affection call him Bill? Lizzie winced a little, feeling that no one with such a name would be welcome at Tangley Manor.

Jessie galloped upstairs, making a tremendous noise in her high spirits.

'Aunt,' she said, flinging open the door of the back room, and ushering in Lizzie, 'here's a rum start! Do you know who this is?'

Mrs. Hardman was poring over a penny periodical, seated on a low wooden stool at an open door, which looked out on a clumsy wooden balcony, whence a flight of wooden steps descended to the narrow bit of yard which the builder could spare from his business premises for the accommodation of his tenants. The room was a kitchen—its chief furniture a deal table, a dresser of the same wood, a much-worn and frayed horsehair couch, a few oddments in the way of chairs, and a very respectable old eight-day clock, which pretended to record the movements of the heavenly bodies and the progress of the seasons, as well as the hours of the day and night, and, aiming at too much, did nothing correctly.

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Truth to say, the kitchen was in an advanced stage of litter, and Mrs. Hardman looked as if she had not brushed her hair for a long time. She was a neatly-built, good-looking woman, with sharp black eyes, ruddy cheeks, and a clever face; but the room and the people altogether had an aspect of absolute vulgarity which filled Lizzie's soul with pain. Yet, as her sister was warm-hearted and affectionate, she felt that she had reason to be thankful and glad.

'She might have received me coldly, and reproached me for having kept aloof from her so long,' thought Lizzie.

Mrs. Hardman flung aside her serial, and jumped up to do honour to the stranger.

'I suppose it's the lady Miss Pincher recommended,' she said, smiling blandly at the supposed customer.

'No, it isn't, old lady. Ain't we clever? It's somebody I'm better pleased to see than all Miss Pincher's customers, though they was to let me buy all their linings and trimmings, and was never to grumble at my charging eighteen-pence for sundries. It's my sister—my sister Liz. And ain't we pretty?'

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turning the reluctant Lizzie round as on a pivot, 'and haven't we a nice figure? And ain't we the lady from tip to toe? Oh, you dear old Liz, I'm *that* pleased!'

Jessie gave her sister another hug, and then began to unbutton Lizzie's ulster.

'What a stylish cut! tailor-made, I'll warrant. None of your draper's slops.'

'That's just like our Jess,' said Mrs. Hardman, smiling approval at her elder niece, 'she's all 'art. Never was such a girl for 'art.'

'What!' cried Lizzie, delighted, 'do you draw or paint, Jessie? Have you really a taste for art?'

'Lor' no, child,' cried Mrs. Hardman, 'we've no hartistes here, nor we don't want. I say your sister Jess has a 'art in a thousand. There ain't many a sister made to keep her distance as she's been made that would show so much 'art to-night. Give me 'art,' ejaculated Mrs. Hardman, 'there's nothing like it.'

Lizzie began to understand that she must learn a new language in her new home, a language of erratic aspirates.

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'Well, my dear,' said Mrs. Hardman, 'I'm glad to see you now you have come. Better late than never. But you'll have to take us in the rough. If you'd have wrote or telegrammed to us, we'd have had things nice for you—or as nice as they can be in a working man's house.'

'Light the fire and get her a cup of tea, aunt, and don't stand jawing there,' said Jessie, without the least idea of disrespect.

'Please don't put yourself out of the way on my account,' said Lizzie, feeling herself an intruder. 'I can do very well without tea. A little milk and water, and a slice of bread and butter.'

'Nonsense, child! you shall have a cosy cup of tea, and a nice light cake. We'll sit down together, and enjoy ourselves a bit. Jess and I are regular pigs for tea and hot cake. You just run across to Bond's and get two penn'orth of tea-milk, Jess, before they shut up for the night.'

Jessie whisked a jug off its nail, and was half-way down the wooden stairs before Lizzie knew what she was doing. Mrs. Hardman lighted the fire and gave Lizzie the bellows to blow, and then

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bustled about the kitchen, filling the kettle, making cakes, and setting out the tea-tray on a comfortable little round table. She did everything with a wonderful alacrity, which contrasted curiously with her lazy attitude when Lizzie entered the room. She was a woman whose life was spent in spurts of activity and long intervals of idleness.

Her cakes were made and in the oven, her kettle was singing gaily, the littered appearance of the kitchen was reduced to something like tidiness, while Lizzie knelt before the fire languidly moving the bellows, and wondering at her aunt's quickness.

Jessie came back with the milk-jug, after an absence of a quarter of an hour.

'I wonder you stayed away so long when you was so took up with your sister,' exclaimed Mrs. Hardman.

'Mrs. Bond has got a new baby, and they made me go upstairs to look at it. Such a mite!'

'Where is my sister Mary?' asked Lizzie, who had been too agitated to make the inquiry sooner. Doesn't she live with you now, aunt?'

'Why, of course she does, Liz—but she don't

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come home over-early of a summer evening. When she leaves the workshop she likes to take a walk by the canal with her young man. I suppose you know she's keeping company?'

'She told me she was—engaged,' faltered Lizzie.

'He's a proof reader at the office of the *Blackford Chronicle;* a very respectable young man. My, what that young man knows! He would make you stare—though I suppose you've plenty of book learning.'

'I am very glad she has chosen such a nice person.'

'He's getting five-and-thirty shillings a week already,' said Jessie, 'and it's to be raised to two pounds very soon, and then they're going to get married. They'll take a house in Monksgate, close to the office—such sweet little houses, only six-and-sixpence a week; gas laid on; green venetians and everything. I think our Poll is a lucky girl.'

Our Poll! It was almost worse than 'Bill.'

'And William, is he at home?' asked Lizzie.

'He's gone to the theayter, with father, to see Mr. Mountmerency take Claude Melnock,' replied

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Mrs. Hardman. 'Have you ever seen Mountmerency's Claude Melnock?'

'I never saw a play in my life,' said Lizzie.

'Poor thing! Well, I never! Me and Jess must take you. We're rare ones for the theayter. You can't give us enough of it.'

'Oh, I do love the "Lady of Lyons," sighed Jess, with an ecstatic air. 'Mountmerency is heavenly as Claude. You'd never forget the way he walks the stage, with such a grand sweep of his legs, and such a graceful bend of his knees, and the loveliest Hessian boots with gold tassels.'

'And his 'Amleck!' exclaimed Mrs. Hardman.

''Amlet, auntie, not 'Amleck,' corrected Jessie; 'you do pronounce names so queerly.'

'Well, I say 'em as my ear ketches 'em, Jess. I'm no scholard.'

Jess had been taking the hot cakes out of the oven, and buttering them, while she talked. The tea was drawn, the candles were lighted—they had been sitting in the firelight hitherto—the little kitchen, with its litter swept out of sight, had a comfortable look.

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Jess insisted upon the visitor occupying the arm-chair, a Windsor chair with a chintz-covered cushion. She poured out the tea, and ministered to her sister lovingly. Lizzie had eaten a light luncheon at half-past one o'clock, and had not broken her fast since, so the tea and light cake seemed positively delicious, and it was nice to be waited upon and made much of by an affectionate sister. She wondered at herself for feeling almost at home in this humble kitchen, with these kindred of hers, who murdered the Queen's English so cruelly, and all whose ideas were different from her own.

'And it is with people like this my life is to be spent in future,' she thought, as she sipped her tea, and let her tired head rest against the back of the chair. 'I have done with refined society, with the grace and beauty of life. I must be a worker among other workers, all of them too busy to cultivate refinement of manners. Well, perhaps it is better to sit in a kitchen where one is loved and thought much of, than to inhabit a fine house upon sufferance, and have one's self-respect wounded twenty times in a day.'

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'And how long have they given you leaf to stay with us, Liz?' asked Mrs. Hardman, when she had finished her first cup of tea, and made herself needlessly greasy with cake.

'I have left Tangley for good, aunt. I want you and my uncle to put me in the way of earning my living,' answered Lizzie quietly.

'What!' cried Mrs. Hardman. 'You've been and gone and run away from the lady as adopted you, and promised your poor father to provide for you 'andsome after her death. You can't have been such a soft as that, child. I can't believe it of you.'

'Money isn't everything in the world, aunt.'

'It's nine-tenths of everything,' answered Mrs. Hardman. 'And you could leave a beautiful home, and kind friends, all for some tantrums, I suppose.'

Lizzie tried to explain her position, without touching on the actual charge that had been brought against her. She told her aunt how she had been wounded by the unkindness of Morton's sisters, how they had accused her of being mean and underhanded in the pursuit of her own interest.

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'All tantrums; nothing but tantrums,' exclaimed Mrs. Hardman contemptuously. 'Of course they was jealous of you. That was what you had to look for. But what did that matter to you so long as the old lady was fond of you and stood by you? You should have given them as good as they brought.'

'It's no use talking about it, aunt. I bore their unkindness as long as I could, but to-day it became just a little too bad.' She burst into tears, and let her head fall on her sister's shoulder, that affectionate young person having knelt by her side to caress and comfort her a few minutes before.

'There, aunt, don't you say another word to her,' said Jessie. 'Don't you see she's right down upset? If you go on at her so she'll think she's not welcome here, and be sorry she ever came to such nasty relations.'

'She's as welcome as the flowers in May, and she ought to know that,' replied Mrs. Hardman, with dignity, as if her personal character were a sufficient guarantee. 'But when I see her flying in the face of her own good fortune I must up and tell her so.'

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'If I may stay here for a day or two I shall be very grateful,' said Lizzie meekly.

'A day or two! You may stay for a year, Liz. There's no one will grudge you your bite and sup.'

'Thank you, dear aunt. But I will only take advantage of your kindness just for a few days, while I look about me, and make up my mind how to begin life for myself. I have had no quarrel with Miss Blake. I love her dearly, and shall so love her to my dying day. But I can never go back to Tangley Manor.'

'It strikes me there's a lover at the bottom of this,' said Mrs. Hardman, looking earnestly at her niece. 'Yes, of course there is. See how she blushes.'

'You're too bad, aunt,' said Jessie indignantly, 'teasing her like this, when she's tired and low. 'Never mind, Liz; a good night's rest will set you up again, and to-morrow you and me will have a nice walk round Blackford, and you shall see all the shops. Won't they be a treat to you after your poky country lanes?'

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CHAPTER XIII.

'I WILL NEVER LIVE UNDER HIS ROOF.'

THE dreary wakefulness of Lizzie Hardman's first night in Milton Street, Blackford, was relieved only by feverish snatches of sleep. Her brain was perpetually picturing the scene of the previous day, travelling over the same ground, recalling every word and every look of her tormentors; and then imagination went to work, and pictured all that had occurred after she left Tangley. Aunt Dora would think her ungrateful—Morton would be disgusted at her abrupt departure. No one would say a good word of her. She must needs seem a traitor and an ingrate.

These mental tortures would have been quite enough to keep her awake all night; but bodily discomfort added a last drop of bitterness to her cup. The small, stuffy bedchamber, the lumpy flock bed,

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were a sore trial after her airy room and comfortable spring mattress. Her bedroom had not been by any means one of the best at the Manor House; its furniture consisted chiefly of old-fashioned articles discarded from the principal apartments; but it was large and airy, with windows that commanded a lovely vista in Tangley Wood. It was perfumed by the roses and jasmine that climbed up to the window-sill; it was kept exquisitely clean; and it was brightened and adorned by Aunt Dora's numerous gifts. What a change to the second-floor bedroom in Milton Street, with its hideous geometrical paper in orange and brown, its patches of gaudy Kidderminster, its coloured counterpane, and flaring pink-and-green abomination in the shape of a fire-stove ornament! Jessie, who had never seen anything better, was rather proud of her bower, and introduced her sister to it with perfect satisfaction of mind.

'There's my Willcox and Gibbs,' she exclaimed, pointing to her sewing machine. 'Ain't it a beauty? I saved up my money to buy it, and it's paid for itself twice over since I've had it. How do you

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like them vases on the chimley-piece? Jim gave them to me; that's Polly's young man, you know.'

And now it was the first morning of Lizzie's life in her new home. She had been introduced to all her relations—to Uncle Hardman, otherwise Father, which patriarchal title was in his case an honorary distinction, like the freedom of the City to a prince of the blood royal, as he had never had any children; to her brother William, who had told her she was a pretty girl, and had pledged himself to find her a good husband among his mates at the foundry; to Polly; and to Polly's young man, who just looked in at breakfast-time, to inquire if his betrothed would like to see Mr. Mountmorency in 'Richyloo.'

Lizzie found them all friendly, but all outrageously vulgar. The printer's reader was the best mannered and the best informed; but then, like many self-educated people, he was horribly conceited. He laughed openly at his betrothed's bad grammar, and evidently considered her aunt a very inferior person.

Breakfast was a scramble. Each member of the family provided for his or her own particular meal.

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Mrs. Hardman fried her rasher on the top of the fire, while Jessie toasted herrings in front of it. William and his uncle began with oatmeal porridge, and wound up with cold hashed mutton and potatoes. The mistress of the house had her teapot; the girls made cocoa for their own drinking. The combination of odours from the frizzling bacon and herrings was far from agreeable. There was no cloth on the table. The plates and cups and saucers were all odd, and mostly cracked. Everybody was in a hurry; everybody spoke with his or her mouth full.

Lizzie recalled her breakfast of yesterday morning—the pretty room, the snowy damask, soft and rich as satin, the old Indian bowls of crimson and yellow roses—such roses as seemed to grow only at Tangley—the glittering silver, the pretty china, the home-made bread and butter, the fruit and honey, and daintinesses of a breakfast designed to tempt delicate appetites. She had fancied herself strong-minded, and yet the loss of these luxurious surroundings troubled her, even amidst her pain at being parted from her benefactress, that one great

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sorrow which she told herself ought to have been her only thought.

The day was bright and sunny, and when breakfast was over, and the family had dispersed, Jessie was eager for the proposed exploration of Blackford's best and busiest streets, but Lizzie begged to be excused for this particular morning. She had a headache, and she had a letter to write —two reasons for staying at home.

'You do as you like, my dear,' said her aunt. 'Our Jess is always glad of any excuse for being idle. If you've got a letter to write, go into the parlour and write it, and don't let no one worrit you.—You'd better be off to your sewing machine, Jess, and try and get them children's frocks done by Saturday night, as you promised the lady. How will you look her in the face, I should like to know, if you can't keep your word?'

'Lor', aunt, I should say I had a mourning order, of course.'

Lizzie was ushered into the parlour, a room which looked into the street, and which was somewhat larger and a great deal cleaner than the kitchen.

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Having lived in a house where daily life was spent in the best and biggest rooms, Lizzie wondered much why her uncle's family herded together in the hot kitchen instead of making use of the cool, clean parlour. She fancied the room must be unhealthy, or that there must be some cogent reason why it should be tabooed by the family.

There was not a thread awry in this state apartment. Scarlet moreen curtains, edged with black velvet, draped the window, knitted antimacassars shrouded the horsehair chairs and sofa. There was a good deal of bead-work in the way of mats, and there was a good deal of primitive colour in the way of carpet. The centre table was of mahogany, sticky with much varnishing, and on it were disposed at mathematical intervals two photograph albums and three gift-books.

Lizzie seated herself before this table, and in sheer languor of spirits explored one of the albums.

Oh, what dreadfully common-looking people her sister's friends were! how badly their gowns hung! and how embarrassed they all seemed as to the

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disposal of their hands! Broad grins alternated with expressions of awful solemnity. Every sitter seemed to have just laid down the same book, on the same richly-carved oak table, in front of the same impossible combination of Grecian Architecture and tropical foliage. She closed the portrait gallery and opened one of the books. It was a cheap edition of Scott's poems, in pearl type, and on the fly-leaf was written, 'To Polly, with Jem's true love, hoping she may find improvement for her mind in these pages.'

It was no use to sit idling there. Her letter must be written sooner or later, her letter of explanation to Aunt Dora. She did not want to lose the afternoon post, but she felt that the letter would be very difficult to write. She did not wish to accuse Clementine and Horatia of unkindness—she could not speak of the accusation they had brought against her—yet how else could she explain her own conduct?

Jessie had brought her a blotting-book with pens and paper, and a smart green glass ink-bottle was staring her in the face. She had no excuse for dawdling.

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But when she had dipped the pen in the ink she paused, at a loss how to express herself, and at last threw down the pen with a sigh of disgust, and leant her head upon her hand in deep despondency.

'What are they doing now at Tangley?' she wondered. What was Morton doing? He was in his study, most likely, writing or reading. Did he miss her? Of late she had spent much of her time in his study. He had been teaching her Latin, in order that she might understand any quotation which she might meet with in the course of her reading; and partly that she might be able to talk to him about Horace, whose odes were the only poetry which Morton thoroughly appreciated. Modern verse was too high-strung and metaphysical for his taste—the Byronic school too passionate; but Horace always satisfied him. He was a man for whom a little poetry of a plain straightforward character was sufficient.

Lizzie allowed her fancies to wander back to the home she had left, and to hang tenderly round the images of those who dwelt there. She thought of

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her horse, and pictured to herself Morton's morning visit to the stables.

'What will he do with my poor Paragon?' she wondered. 'I hope he will ride or drive him. Dear Paragon! To think that such a well-behaved horse should be the indirect cause of my leaving Tangley! It was Morton's gift of the cob that made those girls so angry.'

While she sat idly thinking, a footstep sounded on the stairs; there was a murmur of voices just outside her door. Surely that was a voice she knew —a Tangley voice?

The door opened as she started to her feet, and in the next moment she was sobbing on Dora Blake's shoulder.

'My darling, I have come to fetch you home.'

'No, auntie dearest, I am not so weak as that,' she answered, struggling with her tears. 'I have not been playing a part; not running away in order that I might be sent for or fetched. No, dear auntie, I was very much in earnest. But I am so thankful you have come, for I can tell you a good deal that I could never have written.'

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'I don't want to hear anything. Put on your hat and bid your relations good-bye, and come with me. I have a cab at the door, and we shall catch the one o'clock train for Highclere.'

'Dear aunt, it is quite impossible. I shall never come back to Tangley.'

'Absurd, ridiculous! Just because my nieces have given themselves airs. Temper, Lizzie, temper.'

'No, auntie, it is not temper. I have put up with their airs. That kind of thing never worried me much. Had I not your love to make life sweet? No, it is not temper. But I would not stay in the Queen's house—though it were high treason to leave it—if any one in that house thought me a mean, designing woman.'

'Who ever thought you that, or pretended so to think?'

'Your nieces.'

'Come, Lizzie, half-truths won't do. You must tell me the whole truth. I have a right to know.'

Lizzie could not deny that right, and she told Miss Blake the gist of the conversation which had driven her from Tangley Manor.

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'You see, dear auntie, that my own self-respect forbids my return.'

'I cannot see that, dear. What can it matter to you if these girls in their jealousy choose to think you are setting your cap at their brother? You ought to be able to laugh their insinuations to scorn, knowing your own straightforwardness.'

'Yes, I might do that; but they would not hold their tongues. They would put the same notion into other people's minds; perhaps even Morton himself might come to believe it,' concluded Lizzie, turning crimson at the mere thought of such a thing.

'Morton is much too sensible.'

'I hope he is; but I will never live under his roof while he is single. I will not give any one ground for thinking ill of me. Perhaps years hence, when he is married and has a family, he will let me come to Tangley to take care of his house or his children.'

'And what are you to do in the meantime, while he is choosing his wife and growing his family?'

'I have my plans all made, auntie; all I want is to carry them out. I am not going to tell you that I

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have a mission, or any nonsense of that kind; but I think that as I am a young woman without any close ties or duties, except to love you and be grateful to you, dearest, I ought to do something for my fellow-creatures. Now you know I have done a good deal of nursing among our sick poor, and that I am not a bad nurse.'

'Bad? you are the best nurse I ever had anything to do with. But what has this to do with your future life?'

'Everything. There is a society in London, and at Blackford, for nursing the poor at their own houses, and I am going to become a member of that society, if I can get employed by it. I have read all about it in the newspapers, and I know pretty well what the work is, and what will be required of me. The nurses are ladies by birth and education. They live in a home provided by the society, and they receive a small salary. So, you see, if I can get admitted to the Blackford Home, I shall be quite independent.'

'And you will slave yourself to death.'

'The other nurses have not died of the work.

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There are some who have been doing it for seven or eight years.'

'I will not hear of such a thing, Lizzie. Philanthropy is all very well, but I will not hear of your youth being sacrificed to the miseries of other people.'

'Oh, auntie, why did you teach me to care for the poor, if you didn't mean me to lead a life of usefulness among them?'

'I did not want you to grow up like my nieces, frivolous and selfish to the core of your heart. But I meant you to have some pleasure in your life; and as yet you have had none. And now you desert me, just when you are most necessary to my happiness, and you want to join a nursing sisterhood. If you have made up your mind not to return to Tangley, I will make myself a home elsewhere. I will take a house at Avonmore, and you and I will live there together.'

'Force you to leave the house where you were born! No, auntie; not for the world.'

It was in vain that Dora Blake urged, and pleaded, and expostulated. Lizzie was firm as a

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rock. She had told herself that she must be thorough—and she was thorough, proof even against the entreaties of the friend whom she loved as a mother. The end of it was that Miss Blake went back to Tangley that afternoon completely baffled, and had to acknowledge her failure to Morton, whose disappointment at Lizzie's non-arrival was more intense than the occasion seemed to warrant.

'She is an obstinate girl,' said Aunt Dora, with a sigh. 'She has taken it into her perverse head that she ought to lead a life of usefulness, and she is going to join a nursing sisterhood.'

'And she will wear a ridiculous bonnet,' exclaimed Clementine. 'It all comes from an exaggerated idea of one's own importance in the world, and a desire to distinguish one's self from the ruck of mankind.'

'That kind of ambition will never urge you to sacrifice your own comfort for the sake of other people,' said Morton, with an angry glance at his pretty sister.

'No, I hope I should never be so silly,' answered Tiny, with charming *naïveté;* 'and now, as Lizzie is

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not coming back, I suppose I may ride the cob. He will splinter his stable into lucifer matches if he doesn't get more exercise.'

'You are very obliging. I shall send him out to grass for a month. Perhaps by that time Lizzie may have changed her mind and come home again.'

'I shouldn't be much surprised if she were home by the end of the week,' retorted Tiny. 'I dare say she is only trying to make a feature of herself by this absurd conduct.'

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CHAPTER XIV.

'THERE WAS NO THOUGHT OF FAIR PLAY THEN.'

A DELICIOUS sense of restfulness came over Dulcie's heart and mind after the evening of her betrothal, the never-to-be-forgotten evening which gave a new colour to her life, new courage and hopefulness to her soul. She was content to trust herself utterly to Arthur Haldimond's care and guidance, to lean upon his strength as against a rock, and to lay down her burden of fears and difficulties at his feet, knowing that he was strong enough to carry the load; as a footsore mother, crawling dejectedly on the highway, faint under the weight of a fretful child, feels new life in her limbs when she has transferred her burden to the stronger arms of her husband, so Dulcie having given up her load of care and doubt, was able to contemplate the journey of life under a new and brighter aspect. It was an unspeakable relief for her to know that her father had confided his dark secret to a

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spiritual adviser; that he had not gone on to the bitter end, hardening his heart, unpenitent, unconfessed. He had not shrunk from the self-humiliation involved in such a confession. He had not been too proud to own his sinfulness to a fellow-creature.

Her first thought, even in that thrilling moment when she confessed her love for Arthur Haldimond, had been of her father. She had told him that he should always hold the first place in her heart, and she had been nobly faithful to that promise. And now, happy in the love of a man whose nature seemed to her higher, broader, and grander than Morton's, she could but remember the struggle it cost her to give up her first lover, and how in her despair she had believed that no ray of happiness could ever fall across her future life. She had obeyed her father blindly, uncomplainingly; and lo! she had her reward, in a more romantic, more exalted love, in the devotion of a lover who seemed to her a king among men.

'Arthur,' she said to him one day, a little while after they were engaged, looking shyly up at

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the tall figure and handsome head, 'I can't help thinking that Agamemnon must have been like you.'

She fancied he would feel complimented.

'My dearest,' he replied, smiling at her enthusiasm, 'I should be sorry to resemble such a doubtful character.'

'Perhaps I ought to have taken my comparison from the Bible, and said you were like Saul.'

'Not much better, dear love. Those old heroes are infinitely picturesque, but neither history nor tradition can show us many examples of real beauty of character before Christ came to teach men the divinity of love. The grandeur of a just hatred, the splendour of a great vengeance, shine out grandly in the Old Testament; but charity is a flower of later growth.'

On the evening of her betrothal Dulcie went straight from her lover's arms to her father's study. She wanted to hear from his own lips that he approved her choice, to see a new look of repose and even happiness in his face. She went quietly in, and found him seated in a

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thoughtful attitude by his writing desk, the lamp throwing its light upon his books and leaving his face in deepest shadow. Dulcie drew softly to his side, and knelt by his chair, as she had so often done in the days before a sense of severance had arisen between them.

'Father, my beloved father, I am so happy, and I have come to tell you of my happiness. I cannot believe that it is real till I am sure that you approve, that you are content.'

He clasped her in his arms, and held her to his breast for some moments without a word.

'My dearest, I am more than content. I am happier than I ever hoped to be on this side of the grave. Oh, Dulcie, I thought my sin had blighted your life; and now to hear from those dear lips that you are happy—that the future is not all dark to you,—this is indeed comfort. It is the brightest page in the book of a darkened life, Dulcie—a life which your love alone has solaced.'

'Dear father, your life will be lengthened, please God, by our love and care, for you will let Arthur——'

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her voice trembled a little as she pronounced her lover's name—'you will let Arthur be like a son to you.'

'He shall be as dear as ever a son was to a father if he make my darling happy. But my days are numbered, little one. I would not have you cherish a vain hope. God has been very good to me. He has allowed me to see my beloved child's future life lying before her like a fair open country. I can afford to part from her on the threshold of happiness.'

'No, no, no,' she cried, sobbing as she clung to him with despairing love. 'There can be no happiness for me without you.'

'Dulcie, if you knew how weary I am of life —what a heavy burden my remorse has been to carry through all the long years—you have lightened it, love, you have lightened the load—but it has been heavy, and I am so tired that I can think of the grave as a pleasant place of rest; and I can hope—yes, Dulcie, I have taught myself to hope—for peaceful days in a world beyond the grave, where my darling's face may shine upon me like an angel's. Dulcie,

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there has been a gulf between us of late—was it because you had discovered the one black spot in my life?'

'Not because I loved you less,' she cried eagerly. 'I loved you all the more, after I guessed your sad secret, because I pitied you so much; and I know all about my poor mother—her unhappiness in not loving you as she ought to have done—and how cruelly you were wronged by the friend of your youth. Dearest father, believe me, I have never loved you less.'

'Thank God. I fancied I had lost my Dulcie's love.'

'That could never be.'

'And now there is little more to be done before I shall have lain down my load. I have written to Morton Blake.'

'Oh, father, why have you done that?'

'Because before I leave England for the last time I want to have all things settled between him and me.'

She tightened her arms about him, as if to hold him back from some danger.

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'But the risk—the fear that he might——' she faltered.

'Might do what? Hand me over to the law? I will risk that, Dulcie. I do not think he would bring shame upon you, my poor pet; or that even his revenge would ask for the brief remnant of a broken life. He has hinted at my guilt, in this room. In this room, and in your presence, he shall hear the whole story. Hark! was that the bell? Yes. Perhaps it is he.'

Dulcie listened with fast-beating heart. The doors at Fairview were too substantial for her to hear more than a faint murmur of voices in the hall. Then Scroope opened the study door and ushered in Mr. Blake.

Morton looked grave and anxious; but that vindictive light which had once sparkled in his eyes when he speculated upon Sir Everard's guilt, had gone out for ever. He held out his hand to Dulcie, and their hands met for the first time since she had sat beside his sick bed.

'I am about to leave England for ever, Morton,' said Sir Everard quietly, 'and before closing the

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book of my life—for I shall have done with all interest in this world when I leave this place—I want you to learn the truth about your father and me.'

'Do not trouble yourself,' answered Morton, with a gloomy look. 'I think I know about as much as you can tell me, in your tardy desire to be truthful. The knowledge has come to me in a fragmentary manner, and it has made my life miserable. Six months ago I meant to use that knowledge against you, if ever I should have the power to do so. But now——'

'Now, perhaps, you see that I am dying, and are content to let the last sands run out peacefully——'

'I would sacrifice much for your daughter's sake,' said Morton, with a compassionate glance at Dulcie. 'Do not you think we might as well spare her the pain of this conversation?'

'I know all, Morton. I was in the next room when poor Mrs. Green told you about my mother. Your own words when you were ill, and perhaps half delirious, told me what you suspected. Do not mind me. I know all that can be known, and I shall never love my father less because he has been one of

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the most miserable of men. Not by his own fault alone, remember. The sins of others have fallen heavily upon him.'

'Yes, Morton, my pleading angel has spoken the truth. I was sinned against as well as sinning. I loved your father once as truly as one man can love another; with all my heart, and mind, and strength, thinking him the truest friend man ever had; admiring and respecting in him all the qualities I knew to be wanting in myself; animal spirits, enterprise, a genial nature, a broad love of mankind. I loved him; and he perverted the heart of my wife. I trusted him; and he crept into my paradise, and made it hell. He lied to me, as only the seducer of women can lie. He blighted my life as he blighted the life of the woman he pretended to love. A noble love would have spared her; a false and selfish love wrecked her and betrayed me. Do you want to hear the history of that fatal day, when I went out in the morning to meet your father, swearing to myself that before nightfall one of us two should be lying in the dust, resolved that the sun should not set upon us both living men?'

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Sir Everard had risen, and stood with his back to the hearth by which he had spent so many lonely hours, his arms folded on his breast. Dulcie stood beside him, one hand resting on his shoulder, as if even by that light touch she would assure him of her loving sympathy.

'I met your father surrounded with his friends, but false as he was, he could not face me with the old familiar smile. Perhaps he expected that I should let loose my passion then and there, and make myself a spectacle for the men who knew him and me, and who may have guessed something of our relations. If this were his idea he was disappointed. I held my peace all day—a long, slow day—during which he and I were often riding near each other. I was biding my time; meaning always to overtake him on the road home, and settle the reckoning between us—somehow. I had no deliberate plan of vengeance, but I meant to punish him. I was as willing to fling away my own life as I was determined to try for his. I had no thought of murder, but I wanted the life which by every law of honour it was mine to claim. "The days of duelling were

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past," you will say, perhaps. I answer, "No." The right of a man against the friend who has betrayed him, against the traitor who has corrupted his wife, can never cease while the word honour has any meaning in the minds of men.'

He paused for a few moments, exhausted by the passion with which he had spoken those last words; but neither of his listeners broke the silence, and he went on presently in lower and more deliberate tones.

'I overtook him in the twilight, a little way from the pollard oak beneath which he was found. I led my horse for some distance after I passed the cross-roads, and I stopped on the way to pluck a stake out of a hedge—a heavy, murderous-looking stake, with a sharply pointed end. Vargas's counsel hit the right nail on the head when he tried to show a distinction between a blow from a cudgel and from a stake. When I had provided myself with this weapon, I mounted my horse, and rode sharply after your father, who was walking his horse lazily along in front of me.'

'You must have meant to murder him when you tore up that stake,' said Morton.

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'I meant to kill him, fairly or foully. It was for him to choose the manner of his death. I overtook him, and reined my horse up at his side. There is no need for me to repeat our conversation. He lied to me through thick and thin at first, as I suppose men always do in such cases. When he found I was not to be hoodwinked he turned sullen and defied me; told me that my wife had been sold to me—an innocent sacrifice,—that there was less guilt in her loving him than in her pretending to love me; told me that he should go on loving her as long as his heart beat, that he would never give her up, that I might as well try for a divorce at once. He had made up his mind to take her away from me. Would he go over to Belgium with me to-night and meet me to-morrow at Blankenberg? No. Ten thousand times no. He would give me nothing but legal satisfaction. A divorce was the only way out of our difficulty. He had the audacity to speak to me in his old manner, as if we had been friends without a cloud between us. "Look this thing in the face, Everard," he said. "Be reasonable. We have both made a mess of our lives, but other people

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are to blame for it. There is only one way out of it. "You are wrong," I cried, "there is another way!" and I caught him by the collar and swung him round in his saddle. Then the devil got hold of us both, and we fought like devils; but my rage was stronger than his. He would have compromised matters, and thought himself happy with my cast-off wife. I wanted nothing but revenge. "Do you mean to kill me?" he gasped, when I struck him across the head with the stake. "Yes, that is just what I mean," I told him. He struck at my face with the cane of his hunting-whip, but I caught it and twisted it out of his hand. Then I had him at my mercy, reeling in his saddle, ghastly white, with a slow rivulet of blood trickling down his face—unarmed—helpless. Then and for the first time I felt myself a murderer. There was no thought of fair play then, no thought of life against life. I wanted only to kill him! I thirsted for his blood! I struck him on the head for the second time with all the might of my arm. He dropped sideways off his horse, and the animal galloped away through Blatchmardean Wood. I dismounted and knelt by your father's side, and laid my

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hand upon his breast, waiting for what I had no expectation of finding, some sign that life was not extinct. He was quite dead; that last blow had been fatal. I dragged him to the ditch and laid him there among the weeds and rushes, and then mounted my horse, jumped the hedge, and rode off across country, God knows where, as if Satan had been hunting me. Three or four hours of purposeless riding, and then I went home, in time to hear my wife accuse me of her lover's murder, and to see her die, loving him and hating me. That, Morton Blake, is the history of my crime. If you want a life for a life, you have but to denounce me. The evidence you have pieced together may be strong enough to hang me, in spite of all that has gone before.'

'No,' answered Morton after a pause, 'I shall not denounce you. Six months ago I felt so strongly upon this matter that I should have been capable of the most desperate step. I would have sacrificed my own happiness, Dulcie's even, to avenge my father's death. But I have learnt to think differently. He, too, was a sinner—his sin bore its bitter fruit. I shall

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never lament him less—never feel less execration for the crime that cut short his life,—but his murderer's death on the gallows would not make his last rest more peaceful, his hope of pardon and heaven more secure. You are safe, Sir Everard, from any future pursuit of mine. But you had better do something to silence Vargas's daughter, who has gone back to America broken-hearted because she could not clear her father's name from the stain of a crime he never committed.'

'I will do whatever it may be in my power to do for her,' answered Sir Everard quietly.

'Good night, Dulcie,' said Morton, gently pressing his old love's icy hand. 'Come what may, I shall always think of you with affection.'

And so he left them alone together, father and daughter, no gulf between them now, reunited, united in spirit for ever by perfect confidence and love.

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CHAPTER XV.

LIZZIE'S FAILURE.

LIZZIE HARDMAN found that the entrance to her new career as a nursing sister was not free from difficulty. She had, first and foremost, to produce testimonials to character and capacity, and the obtaining of these from Miss Blake and Mr. Jebb occupied time. Then, when she had proved her respectability to the satisfaction of the Lady Superintendent of the Home which she wished to enter, she had to go through a preliminary course of hospital nursing, her duties being of the humblest, hardest kind, in order to prepare her for the higher grade to which she aspired. This hospital work was to last a month, during which time Miss Hardman, as a day nurse, would be allowed to sleep at the house in Milton Street.

She began her work bravely; but, despite her enthusiasm, the work proved much more arduous,

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much more painful, than she had anticipated. Hitherto her life had been spent among familiar faces—she had enjoyed the consideration and respect of her little world. There had been thorns in her cushion at the Manor House; but all the cottagers whose wants she had ministered to round and about Tangley had honoured her as Miss Blake's adopted daughter, and as the medium through which they received Miss Blake's bounty. She had never gone anywhere empty-handed, and she had always been sure of her welcome.

But in this big city hospital, where nobody knew her or cared for her, how different life seemed! The doctors were always in a hurry when they came in contact with her. They spoke curtly; they took no interest in her work—they treated her as a machine. Then the cases were so various and so complicated, the suffering around her was so terrible, that soul and sense sickened as she felt how little she could do to help or to comfort. It had been one thing to sit beside a dying peasant's bed, in some quiet cottage chamber, listening to his hopeful talk about the better land to which he was journeying; but it was

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another thing to look along the dreary ward where pain-tortured creatures were ready to curse God in their agony, while disease in its most hideous form disgusted the eye that would fain have expressed only sympathy. Lizzie had put her hand to the plough, and she meant to persevere; but there were times when her courage failed utterly, when she walked wearily home to Milton Street with a heart heavy as lead, and shut herself in her little room—the room which she shared with Jessie—to shed bitter tears over her weakness and incapacity.

'I am afraid it is not in me,' she said to herself sometimes in these moments of despondency. 'But I must go on. To fail now would be too contemptible. I should despise myself for my cowardly weakness.'

She could have borne the trials of her daily life better, perhaps, if she could have shut out of her mind all memory of the past. But, unhappily, that past was perpetually in her mind. Her soul yearned for her lost home as Eve may have yearned for the Eden she had forfeited. In the sultry, sickly August days, amid the crime and foulness of the great over-

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grown manufacturing town, Lizzie's fancy returned to the cool shrubberies, the velvet lawns at Tangley, to the sweet companionship, the sympathy and guidance of her one devoted friend. Yet she had no right to complain of being shut out of that paradise; she had left it of her own free will; she had refused to go back, or even to make any compromise with the situation, when Aunt Dora came to fetch her.

'What could I do?' she asked herself sometimes. 'To have gone back would have been to lay myself open to the imputation of having only acted a part. I must justify the step I took in my anger that day. I must show those cruel girls that I can live my own life. I could not go back without forfeiting my self-respect.'

Self-respect. That was the idol she had set up for herself. A stern, exacting deity, which had to be propitiated by the sacrifice of her heart's tenderest feelings, and which gave her very little in return. When the harvest moon glorified the dinginess of Milton Street, when the breath of harvest was in the very air of Tangley, poor Lizzie sat at her bedroom window late into the night, watching the light

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clouds drifting across the round gold moon, and thinking how the same soft light was shining on Tangley Common, with its far-away glimpses of glittering water, and the calm expanse of stubble and meadow rising and falling in gentle undulations to the base of distant hills.

'I'm afraid I shall have to run away from my work,' she thought, in her despondency, feeling health and energy ebbing day by day, till each day the allotted task became more difficult, the vitiated atmosphere more stifling. 'I shall die if I stay in this horrid town.' And then she thought that if she found herself actually incapable of the career she had planned, she would advertise in the local paper for the situation of national schoolmistress in some quiet village, where she might nurse the sick in her own way, and where health and strength, and the power to work, would come back to her in the pure air and quiet rustic life. But she had not broken down yet, and she meant to struggle on, so long as success seemed possible.

'Only when my strength completely fails will I give up,' she said to herself.

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Her relations saw the gradual change in her, and saw that the hospital work was doing her harm. Mrs. Hardman remonstrated vehemently.

'I never did see such nonsense as a young woman turning her back on a comfortable home, where she was quite the lady, to moil and toil in an hospital, bringing home small-poxes and typhold fevers to her family.'

'If you are afraid of that, aunt, I can get a lodging,' answered Lizzie meekly.

'Who said I was afraid?' exclaimed her aunt, somewhat inconsistently. 'I ain't one of that sort, child. I ain't a soft-roed one. But for all that you might find something better to do with your life than mixing poultices and rubbing in linimings. If you must do something for your living, why not join Jess in the dressmaking business? You ought to be tasty, after having lived all your life with gentlefolks; and with her machine you might both do splendid.'

Lizzie did not attempt to explain to her aunt that it was a philanthropic career, and not mere money-earning upon which she had set her heart,

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lest that severely practical matron should ridicule the idea.

'I think I have a knack for sick-nursing, aunt, she said; 'and I'm sure I have no taste for dress-making.'

'Why, didn't you make the gown you've got on?'

'Yes: but I couldn't sit at work all day as Jessie does. It would drive me mad, I think.'

'That's because you ain't used to it.'

Lizzie went on till nearly the end of her probation. She had worked so well, and had shown herself so skilful and intelligent, that the Lady Superior of the Home to which she wished to be admitted had gladly accepted her services. She was to finish her work in the hospital in a few days, and was to take up her abode in the home, which was a fine, old-fashioned house, in a dull, old-fashioned street, in that deserted quarter of Blackford where, a hundred years ago, members of Parliament, wealthy bankers, and justices of the peace, had made their abode. The change from the close quarters of Milton Street to the spacious,

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airy rooms at the Home would be a welcome one, and Lizzie was looking forward to it with pleasure, though she had grown honestly attached to her family, whose good-heartedness went as far as virtue can go to atone for extreme vulgarity.

She was, as it were, on the very threshold of her new life; and she felt proud of having held on through all difficulties, and of having conquered at last, when she went home from the hospital one evening with a racking headache. She had suffered a good deal from headache lately, but this pain in her head was unusually severe. She was half blind with the agony of her throbbing temples, and groped her way along the familiar streets and lanes as if she had been walking in a November fog. Her limbs were so heavy that she could scarcely move them; and it was with the utmost difficulty that she dragged herself to Milton Street, hoping all the time that some stray cab would pass her way so that she could get herself driven home. But no cab appeared. Milton Street was out of the beat of such vehicles, and she was obliged to get home without help.

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'Why, Lizzie, child, you look that bad!' cried Mrs. Hardman, who was sitting on her favourite stool, reading one of those thrilling serials which beguiled her leisure with lofty fancies. 'You've been looking like a ghost, more or less, for the last fortnight, but you look ever so much worse to-night.'

'I have rather a bad headache,' Lizzie admitted feebly, as she sank upon the ancient horse-hair couch which gave to the kitchen something of the luxury of a drawing-room.

'Bilious, I dare say,' said Mrs. Hardman. 'Have a Cockle?'

'No, thank you, aunt.'

'Have a cup of tea, then. I stood the pot on the oven top a purpose for you, and there's a nice bit of cake in the oven.'

'I couldn't take anything, aunt, not even tea. I think I'll go to bed.'

She rose to leave the room, but staggered, and would have fallen but for her aunt's aid. Mrs. Hardman assisted her upstairs and put her to bed as if she had been a little child; and when

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Polly's young man came in presently he was sent straight off for the hospital doctor, who had been most concerned in Lizzie's work.

He came that evening, and the next day, and on many days and evenings, during which Lizzie lay helpless and prostrate, in the stuffy little bedroom where the sewing machine pursued its noisy career, and where Jessie divided herself between her duties as nurse and dressmaker.

Happily for the family in Milton Street, it was neither small-pox nor typhoid which had stricken poor Lizzie. It was none of those fatal scourges at whose name poor humanity trembles. The girl had only broken down under a strain which she was unable to bear. With depressed spirits and desponding soul she had tried to do work which required all the vigour and vivacity of a happy nature and a hopeful mind; and she had fallen under a burden too heavy for her weakness.

Those distracting thoughts about Tangley—that unconquerable longing for the home she had left—had affected her as the love of country

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affects a Swiss peasant. She had sickened for the lost home, and was nigh to death.

She had been feverish in the early part of her illness, but never out of her senses; and when Mrs. Hardman suggested that Jessie should write and tell Miss Blake of her sister's illness, Lizzie entreated that no such letter might be written.

'The doctor does not say that I'm in any danger, does he?' she asked.

'Lord, no, my dear,' answered her aunt energetically. 'No fear of that. You're very low, and he says it'll take you a long time to get round, and that you'll never be strong enough for this sick-nursing fad of yours. It is not within the compass of your constitution, he says, so you'd better give that up at once.'

'Yes, I fear I must give it up—just as I had learned the work, and was going to begin my career. It is very hard. I shall try and get a situation in a village school. I have done a good deal of teaching at Tangley, and I know what the work is.'

'Don't you bother about schools nor nothing, till you're strong. Here's our Poll wants to be married early next month, and for you to go

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with her and Jim to the sea-side for their honeymoon. He'll only be able to get a week's holiday; but you can get a good mouthful of sea air in a week, and it will do you a world of good.'

'It is very kind of Polly, but she ought not to be burdened with an invalid sister during her honeymoon.'

'She won't think you no burden. Ain't she your own sister? Blood's thicker than water, you know.'

'I think I had better go somewhere with Jessie, if I am obliged to have change of air,' said Lizzie, with a faint sigh.

She was wondering how long her little stock of money would hold out, and whether she could afford the luxury of a seaside trip with Jessie. She had insisted upon paying Mrs. Hardman a pound a week for her maintenance; although that hospitable matron would willingly have fed and lodged her gratis. She had spent a little money in fees at the hospital, and the five-and-twenty pounds with which she had left Tangley were reduced by about half. And now she was having strong beef tea and other things which must cost money, and it would be her

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duty to pay Mrs. Hardman more than a pound a week for this period of illness.

'I'm afraid you are spending a great deal of money for me,' she said, one day when her aunt brought her a glass of public-house port, which was both sweet and fiery, and tasted like elderberry wine enriched with the juice of a damson tart.

'You've no call to worry about that, child. Your uncle ain't so poor that he can't afford a bottle of good old port for his niece. I dare say if you'd let me write to Miss Blake she'd send you an 'amper of chice wine. But you must have your own way.'

'Thank you, dear aunt. I'd rather be under an obligation to you than to Miss Blake, dearly as I love her. When I left Tangley I made up my mind to fight the battle of life without any help from rich friends.'

Lizzie was nearly three weeks confined to her bed, and when she was strong enough to get up again and lie on the sofa in the parlour, she looked like the shadow of her former self. It was useless to think of taking a situation yet awhile; it would be a week or two before she could be strong enough

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for the change of air which the doctor declared indispensable to her recovery. She could only lie on her sofa and read a little, and think a great deal, and look forward wonderingly to a future that was wrapped in shadow.

And now August was nearly ended, and the Blackford election was in full progress. The great, busy, overgrown town was in a state of profound excitement, a fever which penetrated even as far as quiet Milton Street. Party feeling ran high, and there was a kind of infection of opinion in the air which people caught unawares. Men and women who had no political opinions at any other time became suddenly vehement and even angry partisans. Costermongers who herded in the vilest slums of the town declared themselves good old Tories, and proclaimed their intention of shedding their blood, if needful, for Church and State and a hereditary peerage. The virulent Radical and the hardened Conservative met on the common ground of the public-house and the chandler's shop. Women paused at their wash-tubs with arms akimbo to give utterance to their views as to how the country should

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be governed. Men who had never invested a five-pound note aired their theories about national finance. Everybody concurred in the one leading idea that the country was going to ruin, and that a total change was required in all existing institutions.

Lizzie, sitting in an arm-chair by the open window of the Milton Street parlour, too weak to venture out of doors, was dependent upon her kindred and the newspapers for all information about the election. But her interest in its progress was intense. She had read every line of the reports of meetings held here and there, by this party or that. She read all Morton's speeches twice over, weighing their effect upon his hearers. She read all that had been said by the rival candidate, in order that she might be able to estimate the strength of Morton's opponent. Her brother William brought her tidings of how things were going. He was able to tell her how the current of popular opinion was setting, and what chance Morton had.

'I think he'll get in,' said William, who was an advanced Liberal.

But Polly's young man was a staunch Conserva-

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tive, attached to the old-established Tory paper, which had begun its career fifty years ago as a six-penny weekly, and had reluctantly transformed itself into a penny daily when Mr. Gladstone abolished the paper duty. Polly's young man opined that Morton had a very poor chance. He would not give a twenty-pound note for his chance.

'And though there's no such thing as bribery now-a-days, his election will cost him a pot of money,' said the printer's reader.

'I don't think he'll care about the money,' answered Lizzie, with a sigh.

'Is he so monstrously rich?'

'I believe he has three or four thousand a year, and he is not particularly fond of money.'

'Egad, I shouldn't mind spending a thousand or two if I had such an income as that to fall back upon. But I believe his election will cost him three or four thousand. I heard that his agent said he would have his own way and do things as he likes this time—that it was Mr. Blake's folly in setting his face against treating and such like that lost his election at Highclere last winter.'

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'Do you know where Mr. Blake is staying?' asked Lizzie.

'Oh, at the Royal, of course. These men of the people always put up at the best hotel, and live on the fat of the land.'

'If you knew Mr. Blake as well as I do, you would know how little he cares about the fat of the land,' said Lizzie, with a faint smile.

She wondered a little that Morton had not come to see her. He must know from Miss Blake where she was living, and it would have cost him very little trouble to put himself into a cab and be driven to Milton Street. To see him only for a few minutes, to hear how his work was prospering, and to hear from his own lips that he was interested in her new life, would have been very sweet to her. Was it not rather unkind of him who had called himself her adopted brother to be so near and yet not come to see her—more especially when she was so interested in his political career, and when it had been in some measure through her persuasion that he had allowed himself to be nominated for Blackford.

'Perhaps he is offended with me for leaving

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Tangley just when I was beginning to be useful to him,' she thought; 'or perhaps those cruel girls have said something that has set him against me altogether. Oh, if they were to make him believe that when I was his nurse and amanuensis I was trying to catch him for a husband, how he would despise me! how I should loathe my life if I knew there was such an idea in his mind!'

The fancy that this was possible tormented her cruelly during those eventful days of the election. It was better, perhaps, she argued with herself, that she should not see Morton—better for her own peace, since it must be the chief effort of her mind to forget how dear he had been to her; yet it was unkind of him not to come; and it was unlike Morton to be unkind.

And now came the decisive day on which the result of the balloting was to be made known. Every vehicle in Blackford had been brought into use for the occasion, and the tag-rag and bobtail of the place were disporting themselves in coaches. Flags were flying, drums beating, the joy-bells of half a dozen churches pealing with distracting vivacity.

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To Lizzie, sitting by the window, with her weary head supported by pillows, and an unread novel lying in her lap, this day seemed the longest in her life. Mrs. Hardman was the only member of the family who made any pretence of staying at home; and even she spent half the day gossiping at the little general shop over the way, or at the milkman's round the corner. The clamour of the bells was almost maddening. Were they ringing in Morton or his opponent? They would peal just as joyously for one as for the other.

'I hope he will not be disappointed a second time,' thought Lizzie. 'He has had so much sorrow within the last year.'

The polling-place was a long way from Milton Street. Mrs. Hardman brought in stray scraps of intelligence, but they were of a totally irrelevant character, and were of no use to Lizzie;—how much Morton's opponent was supposed to have spent upon bribing one particular foundry; how he had given his bespeak to the theatre, and Mr. Montmorency was to act Claude Melnock, with a new Pauline brought expressly from the Surrey Theayter, London, for the occasion. Lizzie longed for her brother's

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return from work. He would know the result of the election. She languished for a visit from Polly's young man, even though he was politically unfriendly to Morton. But there was no hope of either of them appearing before seven o'clock. And the long, blank day, with its clamour of church bells, hung heavily on Lizzie's dejected soul.

At five Mrs. Hardman brought some tea and thin bread and butter, with a small plate of watercresses, all neatly and daintily arranged to tempt an invalid.

'How good you are to me, aunt!' said Lizzie, looking up at her gratefully.

'My dear, I do my best, but this must seem a poor place to you after that there Manor 'ouse. You didn't ought to have come away. And to see the wreck you are. It's enough to make anybody cry to look at you. You look ten years older than you did the night you came from the country; and that pinched and 'aggard—I can't think what you've done with your good looks.'

This was meant kindly, but it was not comforting. Vanity had never been Lizzie's vice, and she was able to smile at her aunt's speech.

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'My looks won't matter when I am a national school teacher, aunt; and perhaps I may get on all the better if people think me older than I am.'

'Perhaps you will, my dear. You've set your heart on a queer kind of life; and it's no use trying to argue you out of your fancy. All I can say is that if Providence had given me good friends and a good 'ome I shouldn't have took and run away from them. I should have put my pride in my pocket.'

'You know the old proverb, aunt. No one but the person who has to wear it can tell where the shoe pinches.'

'That's true, child. I suppose your shoe pinched somewheres. But never mind now. Take your tea like a dear.'

Refreshed by her first cup of tea, Lizzie rose from her chair and went over to the chimney-piece to look at her reflection in the cheap glass above it. She wanted to see if she were indeed as much changed as her aunt said she was—if she had lost all pretension to good looks.

Yes, Mrs. Hardman was quite right. All the brightness and freshness was gone from her face.

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Pinched cheeks, hollow eyes, a pallid complexion, were reflected in the looking-glass—no flatterer at the best of times.

'Perhaps I ought to be glad that Morton did not come to see me,' she said to herself. 'He would have been disgusted at my altered looks. And what would he have thought of this poor little room, with its cheap, vulgar furniture, and the afternoon sun glaring in upon it, after the shady drawing-room at Tangley? Yes, it is better for me that he has kept aloof. I have gone out of his life for ever. Anything that took my mind back to the past would make me more miserable than I am.'

She closed her eyes, exhausted by the long, anxious day, her brain addled by that continual ringing of bells. She let her head fall back upon the pillow, and sank into a gentle doze, soothed by the warmth of the western sun. It was the most refreshing sleep she had enjoyed for a long time, and a slumber in which her fancies wandered away from Blackford into the rural scenery of her past life. She seemed to have been sleeping for a long while—to have lived a lifetime in dreamland, when the sudden opening

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of the door awoke her, and she started up, flushed with sleep, exclaiming, 'Is he elected, William? Is Mr. Blake elected?'

Her back was turned to the door, but it was near the usual hour of her brother's coming home, and she had no doubt that it was he.

'Yes,' answered a voice just behind her chair, 'Morton Blake is member for Blackford, and he has come to tell you of a success which he owes in a great measure to you.'

It was Morton's voice. Morton, not ungrateful or forgetful, was standing beside her. She rose to her feet, but in her surprise and agitation was too weak to stand, and fell back in her chair half fainting.

'Good heavens! how changed you are!' cried Morton, leaning over her, and supporting her head with his arm. 'The person who opened the door to me just now told me you had been ill—but I had no idea it was so serious. You must have been very ill, Lizzie.'

'Yes, I have been very ill.'

'Dangerously ill. And you never let me know.'

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'There was no danger. I was only weak and worn out. I had been working too hard, I suppose. I had my idea of a useful career, just as you have, you see, Morton; only I broke down at the very beginning. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. And now I have chalked out an humbler path for myself.'

'Oh, you still hold to your idea of a useful career, do you?' he asked, smiling at her with unspeakable tenderness. 'My poor Lizzie—so weak, and wan, and pale. Never mind, dear. Tangley and Aunt Dora will soon bring the roses back to your cheeks—the happy light to your eyes.'

'You are very good, but I am not going to Tangley. I shall go into the country with my sister, and get strong and well, and then I shall begin my new life, far away from Tangley.'

'You will. You have a finely developed organ of firmness, Lizzie. Take care that unfeminine virtue does not degenerate into the vice of obstinacy.'

'I would rather be obstinate than weak and wavering.'

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'Yes, and you are seriously ill—you have had a long illness in this small house—where so little can be done for you,—and you keep your old friends in ignorance of your state. That was very cruel, Lizzie.'

'All was done for me that affection could do. When I left Tangley I made up my mind to break altogether with the old life in which I had been so happy. Half-measures would not do. I must make a new beginning, and accept life as Matthew Hardman's granddaughter.'

'Why this sudden resolution? Why did you leave Tangley?'

'I can never tell you that.'

'Suppose I have found it all out for myself? I think I have, Lizzie. You say you would rather be obstinate than weak; yet you were weak enough to abandon your natural and proper home because two foolish, underbred girls took it into their heads to be jealous of you.'

'I only did what self-respect obliged me to do.'

'Very well, we will say no more about that. You are coming back to Tangley to-morrow. Aunt Dora is coming to fetch you.'

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'I have refused to go back, even for her sake.'

'Simply because you have been insulted by my sisters. You need fear no further annoyance from them. They are now at the sea-side; and they are never coming back to the Manor House, except as visitors. They have taken a pretty little villa on the outskirts of Highclere — the Laurels, perhaps you remember it,—and they have engaged a duenna. I believe I am to give them a new pony-carriage, and to furnish their house. I think I committed myself so far. So you see, Lizzie, there is no impediment to your return.'

'You are very, very kind,' answered Lizzie, full of thought, 'but I have set my heart upon a useful career.'

'Where could you be more useful than at Tangley?'

'I am so surprised at your sisters leaving you. Did they go of their own accord?'

'Not quite. It was I who proposed the Laurels as a suitable home for them, close to Highclere, so much more lively than Tangley Common. I told them that, as I was going to be married, they might

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find their position at the Manor House rather less independent than it had been.'

Lizzie looked a little startled by this announcement. Her pallid cheeks had flushed as she talked to Morton, but the feverish tinge faded out now, and left her deadly white.

'You will come home, Lizzie,' said Morton affectionately. 'You will not consider my wife an impediment, I hope?'

For the moment she was unable to answer him. Her lips trembled, but gave no sound.

'Is it Dulcie?' she asked faintly, after a pause.

'No, Dulcie has found happiness elsewhere. She is going to marry Mr. Haldimond.'

'I am glad of that, for I believe Mr. Haldimond is a good man. But who is it that you are going to marry? Yes, I know. It is Lady Frances.'

'What a brilliant idea! Do you think she would have me if I asked her?'

'I don't know. I can't venture to say,' faltered Lizzie.

'Don't you think our tastes are out of harmony?

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She is so fond of field sports, and I don't care a straw for them. Then her penmanship is horrible, the veriest flies' legs. And if I wanted to dictate a pamphlet she would never have patience to write for me. No, Lizzie, I don't think Fanny Grange would be a happy woman as my wife, or that I should be altogether blessed as her husband. A man's wife should be really and truly a helpmeet to him, able to sympathize with him in all that is best and holiest in his life, to lead him upward and not downward. But we'll talk more of this by-and-by. I want you to promise to come back to Tangley to-morrow, if you can bear the journey.'

'I shall never go to Tangley again. I thank you with all my heart for your goodness in asking me to return, but I know that I shall be happier in the active life that I have planned for myself. My mind is quite made up.'

'Then you are a cruel girl, and you will make to-day's triumph gall and wormwood to me. Do you know why I have kept aloof from you so long, Lizzie? I waited till I had won my election. I thought you would be proud of my success—the

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success in which you have had so great a part; for without your sympathy I should have given up all idea of getting into Parliament for the next ten years, after my defeat at Highclere—and I wanted to come to you directly after my election. Here I am, and you are going to spoil everything by being disagreeable.'

'I am not disagreeable, Morton. I am only reasonable. Your wife will not want me at Tangley. To you I may be like a sister, but I should be a stranger to her; and before long she would begin to think of me as an intruder. It would be hard for me to find myself humiliated by her, as I have been humiliated by your sisters, and to have to turn my back upon that dear place a second time.'

'Very well, Lizzie, if you refuse to make Tangley your future home you will place me in a very awkward dilemma with my sisters.'

'How so?'

'Because I have told them that I am going to marry, and you are the only wife I will ever take home to Tangley.'

'Morton!'

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'You left my house because you were insulted in it. You must come back as its mistress.'

'Morton, you are laughing at me.'

'I was never so much in earnest in my life. I have lived for nearly two months without you, and the time has been long enough to teach me that you are necessary to my happiness. Your friendship first cured me of the old love. Your many virtues and sweet, unconscious charms taught me a new love. It is for you to make it a happy one. I shall never regret anything I have lost in life if I can but win you.'

'Morton, I am so unworthy of you—a penniless dependent, owing everything to your aunt's charity. Just look round this room, and remember that the only relations I have in the world live in it; or rather do not live in it, for they think it too good for daily use. Remember that they are ignorant people, good, and kind, and true-hearted, but vulgar in all their habits and ideas. I am not ashamed of them, because I belong to them; but what would you feel if my uncle and aunt were to come to Tangley Manor to see their niece, or if my brother and sisters

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expected to be received by me? And once having come back to them, and been cared for by them, I can't go away and turn my back upon them for ever, don't you see, Morton.'

'I do see, I do understand, dearest. And your brother and sisters and uncle and aunt shall be welcome at Tangley Manor whenever they may please to come. Do you think I am so base a hound that I can profess a regard for the working classes and their interests, and yet blush to own that my grandfather and my wife's grandfather were working men? Fortune favoured my grandfather, and he climbed to the top of the ladder, while your grandfather—who must have been an honest man, or mine would not have loved him so well—stayed at the bottom. The only difference between your pedigree and mine is success; and you shall share the fortune that success brought, darling, if you will—if you only will.'

'Oh, Morton, I have loved you ever since I was a child. I wish you were a pauper, that you might know how true my love is.'

'But I don't, Lizzie. I'll take your love upon

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trust. And now may I call your aunt in and tell her? She looked very suspicious just now when I asked to see you. I shouldn't wonder if she were listening at the door.'

'Oh, Morton!'

'Don't be shocked, dear. A duchess might do as much on such an occasion.'

'Morton, I'm afraid you will be disgusted with them. They talk in a dreadfully vulgar style, but they are very good.'

'Never mind their talk, dear. Your brother and sisters are not too old to learn a better style. We'll get them polished a little, just to make you happy.'

He opened the door in a leisurely way, and found Mrs. Hardman in the kitchen, looking out of the window with an abstracted air, her arms folded on the window-sill, her voice uplifted in a popular melody; by all which signs and tokens he concluded that she had been listening. William and his sister Jessie were both at home. Mary was out with her young man; and it is to be observed that a young woman engaged to a young man is rarely to be found in the domestic circle.

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'It was very cruel of you not to let me know that Lizzie was so ill,' said Morton, when he had been introduced to the family.

'It was all her fault,' answered Mrs. Hardman. 'She was so set against my writing that I didn't dare to do it for fear she should fret and make herself worse. But it laid heavy on my conscience, I can tell you. Ain't she a wreck?'

'She is looking very ill; but my aunt will be here to-morrow, and I shall send them both off to Scarborough for a month; and then there will be a wedding, and you must be bridesmaid, Miss Hardman.'

Jessie clasped her hands, and gave a hoydenish jump, in the exuberance of her delight.

'Didn't I say there was a lover at the bottom of it all?' exclaimed Mrs. Hardman. 'Well, Mr. Blake, I wish you joy, and I think, though Lizzie's a lucky girl in getting such a husband, you're a lucky man in getting such a wife; for though I says it that shouldn't, there never was a sweeter young woman than my niece, sir. And now I suppose we shall see no more of her. She'll never come to Milton Street no more after she's married.'

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'Indeed she will, Mrs. Hardman,' answered Morton heartily. 'She shall come to see you, wherever you are, and you must come to see her.'

'No, thank you, sir,' said the matron, bridling, 'it's very kind of you to mention it, but I know when I'm in my element. I'm very fond of Liz, but I shouldn't feel easy in a fine house; and I'll never go where I ain't in my own element. That's the only kind of pride I've got left in me. I know my element, and I like to keep in it.'

'I think we could make you comfortable at Tangley,' said Morton, smiling.

'Yes, if I could come and help to cook a great dinner, or give a hand in your spring cleaning, and sit down to my meals free and easy with your servants. But you and Lizzie wouldn't like that. And as to sitting on a satin-covered chair, and twiddling my thumbs, I couldn't do it for no one.'

'Well, I hope you'll change your mind when you come to know us better. Lizzie's brother and sisters must come and see what kind of place Tangley is, and then they may be able to tempt you.'

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'I'll come, and glad,' said Jessie, 'for I think Liz is too good a sort to be ashamed of me.'

Morton winced a little at hearing his betrothed described as a good sort; but he came through the whole ordeal nobly; and he sat down by-and-by to a sumptuous spread of tea, hot cakes, watercresses, and shrimps, in the bosom of his new family.

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CHAPTER XVI.

THICKER THAN WATER.

It was September, and the harvest was nearly over in the fields round Austhorpe—a peerless September morning, sweet to the sportsman lightly treading the stubble with a brace of flop-eared setters bounding before him; sweet to the village truant climbing the briary bank where the blackberries were ripening in the autumn sun; but sweeter still to Arthur Haldimond; for this fair September morning was to be his wedding day, and in the soft light of the harvest moon Dulcie and he were to be crossing the Channel, on the first stage of their journey to the Tyrol; with which romantic region Mr. Haldimond had made himself familiar years ago, when he was an undergraduate, with ample leisure and well-filled purse, roaming the Continent in quest of some quiet nook for study.

It was to be a very simple wedding. Miss

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Courtenay's engagement had been told to only a few people, but those few had not been so silent as they ought to have been about the secret confided to them, and the little world of Austhorpe had grown familiar with the fact even before the banns were read in the village church. Every one wanted to be asked to the wedding, and Sir Everard received many intimations direct and indirect to that effect; but he pleaded his own precarious health, and the bridegroom's profession, as reasons for a quiet wedding.

'I could not stand the excitement of a crowd,' he said, when Mrs. Aspinall remonstrated with him on his cruelty to the neighbourhood, 'and Haldimond hates the idea of a fuss.'

'But Dulcie,' screamed Mrs. Aspinall, 'you have to think of Dulcie. Dulcie ought not to be cheated out of the one great triumph of a pretty girl's existence—a stylish wedding.'

'Dulcie does not wish for a stylish wedding. You forget that her situation is somewhat delicate. A few months ago she was engaged to Morton Blake.'

'Ah,' sighed Mrs. Aspinall, 'that was a sad pity. Your rooted objection to trade, I suppose. Well, a

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man of your old family would naturally be prejudiced. And Mr. Haldimond is very nice—remarkably nice. I have not a word to say against him. I suppose *I* may come to the wedding, having known your dear child ever since she was a tiny thing?'

'We shall be delighted to have your company, if you will not be bored by a humdrum wedding.'

'Humdrum! As if Dulcie's wedding could be humdrum to me. You do not know the interest I have felt in that sweet girl,' sighed Mrs. Aspinall, thinking how fondly she had hoped to have the sweet girl for a step-daughter, and how little chance there was of that hope being realized.

'You will come, then. Lord Blatchmardean and his son will be with us. Lady Frances will be Dulcie's bridesmaid.'

'Only one bridesmaid?'

'Yes, but that bridesmaid is her bosom friend—the girl who has been a sister to her in her trouble. Don't you think it is better to have one such bridesmaid than ten foolish virgins who care a great deal less for the bride than for the fine gowns they wear at her wedding?'

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'True,' assented Mrs. Aspinall. 'Fanny Grange is very real—rather rough and masculine in her ways, not my ideal girl—but very staunch. I used to think she was in love with Morton, and that it would be a very nice thing if those two were to make a match of it, for poor Lord Blatchmardean hasn't sixpence to give his daughter, you know—but when I sounded her the other day she told me plainly that she doesn't care a straw for him. She admitted that in their old boy and girl days, when he was a lad at Rugby and she a child in short petticoats, she had been awfully fond of him; but it has all worn off, it seems. I suppose Dulcie's engagement cured her. She would hardly like the reversion of a heart; though, as for that, a girl in her circumstances ought not to be particular.'

And now the wedding day had come, and Dulcie, simply dressed in her dove-coloured travelling gown, with a dove-coloured straw hat, and just one sprig of orange blossom pinned among the soft folds of her old Mechlin fichu, walked through the fields to church, leaning on her father's arm. Lord Blatchmardean followed with Mrs. Aspinall, who had a new

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gown from Worth for the occasion, determined to shoot one final arrow at the mark she had so often tried to hit, Sir Everard's marble heart. The gown was an elaborate combination of velvet and silk, of the last new colour, bottle-glass, and would be useful for winter wear; and in this bottle-glass gown, with a bottle-glass bonnet and feather, and ten-buttoned Swedish gloves, Mrs. Aspinall felt herself above criticism. Dulcie had insisted that if Mrs. Aspinall came to the wedding, Miss Pawker should be asked too, so the useful Louisa was there, looking really fashionable, in a cast-off gown of her patroness which had been done up for the occasion. Lady Frances wore a kind of glorified lawn tennis costume of soft white cashmere and scarlet velvet, with a scarlet toque perched coquettishly upon her curly black hair, and a cluster of scarlet geraniums and stephanotis pinned on her shoulder—a costume which Beville approved in his own vernacular as 'a fetching get-up.'

Poor Beville, with Miss Pawker leaning on his arm, looked like a victim being led to the sacrifice. To have to assist at the wedding of the one woman who could have made his life happy was a sore trial.

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That one other woman who was destined to be his consoler had not yet appeared on life's horizon: but that, for a man of Beville's temperament, there would be such a woman nobody in his senses could doubt.

The bishop of the diocese was Arthur Haldimond's bosom friend. He had been in charge of an important London parish during the earlier part of Mr. Haldimond's ministry in Whitechapel, and the two men had seen much of each other. They had the same views, the same opinions, the same broad and liberal cast of mind and character; and the happy turn of events which had raised the vicar to the episcopal bench had in no wise weakened the tie between them. When the bishop heard that his friend was going to be married he at once declared his intention of tying the knot.

'This redeems the whole thing,' said Mrs. Aspinall, with a reverent glance at his lordship's lawn sleeves, 'and after all there is a quiet elegance in a wedding of this kind, which your hurly-burly marriages at St. George's can never attain.'

The bare old church was decked with flowers—flowers from hothouses, and flowers from cottage

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gardens. Every wreath had been woven, every cluster arranged, by hands that worked with loving zeal. The whole thing had been done in one afternoon, as if by magic. And when the ceremonial was over, and the schoolmistress was making as much noise as the harmonium was capable of, in the swelling chords of Mendelssohn's Wedding March, Dulcie and her husband walked along a path of thickly-strewn blossoms that had been sought for far and wide, in wood and field—harebells and purple heath-bloom, and all the family of autumn flowers.

Sir Everard gave his arm to Lady Frances when they left the church, while Mrs. Aspinall, who had had quite enough of Lord Blatchmardean and his disquisition on the last improvement in hay-saving machinery, impounded the bishop, leaving the earl to follow with his son. The newly married pair were to drive straight from the church gate to Highclere station, where they would arrive just in time to catch the one o'clock express for London, thus escaping the horrors of a wedding breakfast.

'Father,' said Dulcie, clinging to Sir Everard in the farewell at the gate, 'when shall we see you again?'

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'Next winter, perhaps, my pet. If your husband will bring you to Algiers.'

'Of course he will take me.—You will take me to see papa, won't you, Arthur? That is a promise.'

'Was it you or I who promised just now to obey?' asked her husband, smiling down at the sweet uplifted face. 'I know which of us will have to do it. Yes, dear, you shall be taken to Algiers. If you ordered me to take you to the moon I should have to set about the journey somehow, though I might feel sure of breaking down.'

'It is not a joke, sir, I am very much in earnest. Wherever papa spends the winter I must go to see him.'

'Dear love, it shall be so, God helping us,' answered Mr. Haldimond, very much in earnest this time.

Then came the last clinging embrace between father and daughter, a little hand given to the friends who clustered at the gate. And then Dulcie stepped lightly to her place in the barouche, her husband seated himself by her side, the villagers, men,

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women, and children, set up a hearty cheer, and the carriage rolled away in a cloud of sunlit dust, that encircled it like a nimbus.

'What shall I do without her?' sighed Sir Everard. 'But thank God she is happy.'

The little party, *minus* bride and bridegroom, went back to Fairview, to eat lobster salad and Périgord pie, and drink to the wedded lovers in sparkling wines. Sir Everard tried his hardest to seem gayer than he was wont to be; but Frances Grange, who had learned how to read his face, could see that his heart was heavy. Mrs. Aspinall, confident in the success of her bottle-glass gown, and of that new hair-dye which was ever so much more natural than the last, provided vivacity and spirits for the whole party, cheering Sir Everard with sympathetic ogles, and openly coquetting with the bishop. Sparkling wines at an unusual hour had opened the sluices of Mrs. Aspinall's eloquence, and she talked enough for everybody, surveying the party with a superior smile, as if she could not help admitting to herself that they were all very stupid, and that she was the life of the assembly.

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She talked of herself chiefly, of her early married life, and the royal personages and diplomatic celebrities with whom she had been on intimate terms during her wanderings on the Continent.

'We had a delicious villa at Posilipo, and received all the best people in Naples. Poor Bomba and I were like brother and sister. He used to tell me all his plans, and he really had a very noble mind—a noble mind. I have always hated Garibaldi, and all that nonsense about the unification of Italy. The country has been going down ever since the Bourbons left it. And the Queen was very sweet. Yes, we spent some happy days at Posilipo.'

Mrs. Aspinall sighed, and allowed Scroope to fill her glass with dry champagne. It was about the seventh time the glass had been filled, conscientiously, and the dowager was beginning to wander a little.

'Dear Holly Hill,' she exclaimed, with a maudlin air. 'Bishop, you know the south of Ireland?'

She accompanied the remark with a playful tap of her fan upon the episcopal knuckles, and she smiled a melting smile.

'Yes, madam, I have enjoyed some very pleasant

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days in the south of Ireland. A fine hospitable race, your southern Irish.'

'I am so glad you like them,' said Mrs. Aspinall. 'I don't often talk of my old home, but I dearly love the memory of it. Dear Holly Hill, looking down on the beautiful river. I was born there, my brothers and sisters were born there.' Moved by these touching memories, the lady began to sing, in a voice which time had slightly cracked,—

'Ye bells of Shandon, that sound so grand on
The pleasant waters of the river Lee.'

'Arrah, thin, darlin'. I'm glad ye've not forgotten the ould counthry,' exclaimed a rich Irish voice at the window; and Mrs. Aspinall and all the company beheld a stout, red-haired, florid, middle-aged gentleman looking in at them.

'Who is that?' faltered the mistress of Aspinall Towers, staring at the intruder through her binoculars. 'I don't think I know him.'

'Bedad an' ye do, me dear, ye know your brother Pat, though it's ten years since ye've laid eyes on him. Faith, I'll come round by the door, and tell ye all about me journey toEngland, and

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how I tuk it into my head to come down to Daleshire before I went back to Holyhead, if the masther of the house will excuse me makin' so free.'

'Pray come in and join us,' said Sir Everard, smiling. 'Scroope, bring the gentleman round.'

'My name's Ryan, surr—Pat Ryan,—though my own sister don't take the throuble to introjooce me,' said the stranger, with a crushing look at Mrs. Aspinall.

He disappeared from the window, and was ushered in by Scroope. 'Good mornin' to ye, ladees an' gintlemen—your servant,' he said, with a comprehensive bow, and then he walked over to Mrs. Aspinall, and gave her a brotherly kiss, a loud smack, which was altogether the most vulgar thing in kisses. His sister writhed under the infliction.

'You shouldn't have intruded yourself upon my friends, Patrick,' she said severely. 'I am very glad to see you, of course; but you should have waited at the Towers till I got home.'

'Why thin, shure, if I'd waited there till you got home, I'd have had to go away widout seein' ye.

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I must be back at Highclere by foive o'clock to catch the train for Chester. You moight take it more koindly, my comin', if you knew the throuble it cost me—an' a business like mine, that can't be neglected. I asked your fine paycock of a futman where ye'd gone, and when he tould me ye was at a weddin' breakfast, I ses, then I'll be afther followin' her. Wan gob more or less at a weddin' breakfast makes no differ. The more the merrier. There's always lashins and lavins.'

Mrs. Aspinall looked as if she was going into hysterics. 'Lashins and lavins!' and this red-haired, florid man, who reeked with vulgarity, and talked the broadest Irish, was her very brother. There was nothing to be gained by denying the relationship; he would have laughed her to scorn. She had kept him at a distance for fifteen years by all manner of diplomatic devices; and now when she was declined into the vale of years, and was less able to cope with him, he came down upon her like an avalanche. She could have lifted up her voice and wept; but she felt that she must face the situation, and she faced it with a sickly smile.

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'My brother is a thorough Milesian,' she said, with a deprecating glance, first at her host and then at the bishop. Beville and his sister were choking with laughter behind their handkerchiefs; but the elder members of the party were preternaturally grave. 'He has hardly ever left his native country.'

'Oh, devil a lie in it! faix, gintlemen, when a man kills more pigs than any other dayler in Cork he'd not be afther roamin' about the world for sport. I like to stand in my own stall, and see that the mate gets properly handled, and now here's Chicago takin' the bread out of our mouths with its machine-killed pork. Ye just stand your grunter on a thrap, ye see, sir, and turn a handle, and he falls through and gets his throat cut widout knowin' anything about it, and in so many seconds he's singed and dressed, and ready for shippin'. Who's to stand agen such a thrade as that, I'd loike to know, unless he do be sticking close to his own counter? There ain't a better business than mine in Cork, and though I'm no self-made man, for I'd a father before me I'm

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proud to think I've doubled and thribled the trade since the ould gintleman shifted his sticks to a better world. Bedad, 'tis a great change, entirely, from the days that play-boy Tim Daly crissened me "Pigs is rus.' Bad scran to them, 'tis fallin' they are now widout no machinery at all, at all.'

Scroope had placed a plate and knife and fork before the new-comer, and had filled his glass with champagne. He now offered the stranger a pâté de foie gras, which had been only slightly dipped into.

'What'll this be now?' asked the pork butcher, with a puzzled air of appeal to the company generally. 'It looks uncommon nasty.'

'Strasburg pie, Patrick. It is excellent,' said Mrs. Aspinall, looking daggers at the unconscious offender.

'Thank ye kindly, my man, but I'd rather lave it alone,' said Patrick, looking up at the butler. 'There's too much hog's lard about it for my taste. I never ate what I don't understand. I'll throuble yez for a slice of that ham of bacon

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there. He looks mighty well for an English ham.'

Mr. Ryan ate a plate of ham and drank a good many glasses of Clicquot with hearty relish. He made himself quite at home, and told the company a good deal about himself and his sister. How their father had begun life in a very small way as a general dealer in a by-street of Cork; how he had pushed his trade till he made a big business in pork and Irish butter. How they had been brought up at an elegant country seat called Holly Hill, which the pork butcher had built for himself. How Calphurnia had been sent to a genteel boarding school, and no money spared on her education.

'Whereby you may fancy the mortification it was to the poor ould father when she married a stuck-up spalpeen of an honourable nobody who happened to be quartered at Cork with his rigiment, and then turned her back on the whole bilin' of us, all as wan we wasn't good enough for the gintry, be gor,' concluded Mr. Ryan. 'But she and me made pace when we met permiscuous in

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London tin year ago, and we've been friends ever since,—haven't us, my darlin'?'

Mrs. Aspinall assured her brother, before the whole assembly, that she had always entertained the warmest affection for him.

'And now, Patrick, I must ask you to see me home,' she said blandly. 'It's getting late, and as I shall have to drive you to Highclere——'

'Shure, there's a good half-hour to spare,' replied Mr. Ryan, looking at his watch, and then handing his glass to the butler. 'I'll see the bottom of the bottle.'

'Patrick, you are making your visit an infliction,' cried Mrs. Aspinall indignantly.

'Be aisy now, he don't mind me,' said Patrick, with a friendly glance at his host. ''Tis only yourself that's so moighty perticular. Though be-dad,' with a wink at Sir Everard, 'ye same to have the advantige of me in that quarter, me lov', for be all appearance ye made pretty free with the fiz before I came.'

Mrs. Aspinall sat down again, pale with anger at this home-thrust,—a pallor that was visible

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under her artistic red. She could make no further struggle. She could only sit and suffer, and speculate dimly as to whether she would be able to go on living at the Towers after this: whether speedy exile to Florence or Rome would not be inevitable: whether such a hideous exposure could in any wise be lived down.

Mr. Ryan finished his bottle of champagne, making himself as much at home with Sir Everard and the bishop as if he had been used to such company all his life. He was profusely complimentary to the two younger ladies, waxing poetical about Lady Frances Grange's eyes, and quoting Tom Moore's lines, 'To ladies' eyes around, boys, you can't refuse.' He had even a kindly word for Miss Pawker, who thought him one of the nicest men she had ever met; bating a touch of vulgarity which was too distinctly national to be altogether offensive. She was inclined to wish, like Desdemona, that Heaven had made her such a man; and she felt a gentle thrill when Mr. Ryan mentioned incidentally that he was a widower, and on the look-out for a sensible,

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good-humoured wife, not too young to be a clever housekeeper, nor too old to be pleasing.

He finished his bottle, and then offered his sister his arm to walk back to the Towers. Mrs. Aspinall made the best of her painful position, and smiled blandly as she wished everybody good-bye.

'I am sorry you must leave the neighbourhood so soon, Mr. Ryan,' said the bishop, as the portly pork-butcher grasped his hand.

'If my sister's inclined to be hospitable, me lord, shure, I don't know that I'd mind wasting a week in these parts,' returned Mr. Ryan, with a friendly glance at Louisa, who had impressed him with a strong idea of her common sense; and common sense was Patrick's favourite virtue in woman, possibly because his late wife had been an arrant fool.

'You know you are welcome at the Towers, Patrick,' said Mrs. Aspinall, with a convulsive smile.

'Faith, I'm be no manes so sure of that,' cried that monster of a brother, with his stentorian laugh, 'but I know I ought to be, for blood's thicker than water, and you and me was always good friends; and didn't

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I cane Tim Rooney for oglin' you on the parade at Queenstown? Sure and a fine bouncing young woman you was in those days. Divil a bit did I ever expect to see yez shrivelled to such a thrid paper.'

'A rough diamond,' said Mrs. Aspinall to Sir Everard, still blandly smiling, but with the smile that masks mental agony. 'Are you coming, Patrick?'

'I am ready, my dear, but I'd like to tip the butler furrst,' remonstrated Patrick, in a loud whisper. 'Thim fellows always expect it on such an occasion as this.'

But Mrs. Aspinall would not wait for the butler to be tipped. She felt that her brother appeared at his worst when compared with the calm and polished Scroope. She dragged him away somehow, breathing a little more freely when she was in the avenue.

'Oh, Patrick, Patrick,' she exclaimed, with a stifled sob, 'what a disgrace you've brought upon me!'

'No, ma'am,' answered the pork butcher, with dignity, 'there's no disgrace of my bringing, for I'm

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an honest man that has never paid less than twenty shillings in the pound, and has a good chance to be Mayor of Cork before he dies. The disgrace is yours, if you're ashamed of your own flesh and blood. Av I only broke, an' druv a carrige, an' put a cockade in me man's hat, an' paid two shillings in the pound, 'tis proud of me ye'd be. Bedad, I was disgracefully honest.'

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CHAPTER XVII.

'THE REST IS SILENCE.'

SIR EVERARD was alone, standing with an absent air in a deserted room where everything—from the open piano to the little heap of daintily bound duodecimos on the table by the sofa—seemed to speak of Dulcie. Lord Blatchmardean and his son and daughter had taken leave immediately after Mrs. Aspinall's departure. The bishop had followed them. The bustle and excitement appertaining to even the quietest wedding were over and done with. Scroope and his man were clearing the table and carrying off the fine old Georgian tankards and college cups to the pantry, there to be swathed in baize, preparatory to being confined in the gloom of an iron-lined plate-room. The gardeners had left their work, indulged with a holiday in honour of Miss Courtenay's marriage. The village schoolroom was being prepared for a festal tea; the joy-bells were ringing gaily in the

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old square tower. But here at Fairview all was very quiet and lonely.

'How I shall miss her, now and hereafter!' mused Sir Everard, looking round the familiar room. While he was standing thus contemplating the things associated with his daughter's past life almost as if they were living creatures, and could in some wise sympathize with him in his hour of sorrow, the glass door was softly opened, and he heard the silken rustling of a woman's gown creeping towards him as he stood with his back to the door.

He turned suddenly, half expecting to see her whose image so completely filled his thoughts, and yet he knew that she was far away by this time—in London, or on the road to Dover.

It was not Dulcie, but Frances Grange.

'Don't be angry with me for coming back,' she faltered, looking up at him shyly, her colour changing from red to pale as she spoke; 'I wanted so much to know your plans—to say ever so many things—which I was afraid to say before the bishop and Mrs. Aspinall. So when the carriage was half-way to Blatchmardean I told the Sheik I had some business

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in the village, and left him to go home with Beville. Are you vexed with me for worrying you?'

'Vexed with you for being kind and full of compassion? No, my fair Diana, I am very grateful to you. I was just feeling horribly lonely, and it is a comfort to see some one whom Dulcie loves, to be able to talk of her with her favourite friend.'

'Yes, I think she is fond of me,' said Frances thoughtfully. 'I tried very hard to win her love.'

'And you succeeded in winning it without stint. I can never thank you enough for your goodness. You came to us in the hour of trouble, and brought life and light into our home. God knows how we should have fared without you.'

'I am thankful to think I was of use. I am proud to remember that you trusted me,' answered Frances gravely.

Her colour—that bright carnation which harmonized so perfectly with her nut-brown skin—had not yet come back. She was very pale and full of thought.

'Sit down in my darling's chair,' said Sir Everard. 'You must give me my tea—the last I shall taste in this house.'

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'You are going away—at once?'

'To-night. I leave by the mail.'

'And you are not coming back till next spring?'

'No. You see the doctors insist upon my spending the winter in Algiers, and I have my own ideas as to my destination in the spring?'

Frances Grange understood him. There is nothing so quick to understand as a girl's sympathy with a man of graver years, whom she has taken it into her head to worship: and Frances Grange had made Sir Everard her hero. Even the reserve which kept her at a distance, tempered as it was by kindly feeling and an evident appreciation of her charms, gave strength and depth to her regard.

'And you are going away—alone?

'Quite alone.'

'To be ill, perhaps; in a strange country; without a friend.'

'It is most likely I shall have to bear even that. But I have a capital servant, a fellow as faithful as Byron's Fletcher, a man of considerable education. You need not think of me as altogether miserable. I am content that my life should finish in gloom, now

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that Dulcie is secure of spending hers in the sunshine of a happy love. I leave Fairview; but my thoughts and my affection will still hover round it, for Dulcie will be here with her husband. It is to be their home when they return from their honeymoon.'

'Sir Everard, I cannot bear to think of your being alone in that strange, remote country. I don't know how to say it, but I feel as if I could be of use to you, a companion to you sometimes, in your hours of weariness, that I might in some poor degree fill your daughter's place. Will you let Beville and me come with you? I can make him do anything I like, dear good fellow. I don't mean for us to be with you always, only to be in the same hotel, or the same town, to be at hand if you wanted sympathy, to nurse you if you were ill. Let us come.'

She looked up at him with tearful eyes, her hands clasped, a child-like, reverent affection in her attitude and expression that smote him to the heart. Oh, had he but been worthy of such a love, could he but have said, 'Be my wife, make the remnant of my days blessed,' he might have gathered one of the fairest flowers that ever bloomed within the reach of

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a man's hand. Conscience and honour forbade. He only took the clasped hands in both his own, and bent down to kiss the pale forehead.

'My sweetest child, I am unworthy of your goodness. I am unworthy of one thought from you. I am more touched than I can say by this last evidence of your regard. I shall treasure the memory of your sweetness till I am clay. But the home to which I am going will allow of no such fair companionship. Neither love nor friendship can enter there. Over the door of that dwelling is inscribed, "No woman must enter."'

'I cannot understand,' faltered Frances.

'Dear girl, you will know all in good time. But be sure always that your affection has lent a light to this last hour of my worldly life which will help to brighten my way to the grave. You will be kind to Dulcie, will you not, when I am far away? You will not let new ties blot her out of your mind?'

'Never!' exclaimed Frances, 'I am not likely make new ties,' with the conviction of a woman who believes she has done with love for ever, because she

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once loved in vain, 'and Dulcie will be as dear as a sister to me as long as I live. There is no chance of my changing. I only hope she will not change. But you will come back next May, Sir Everard? You will see your daughter happy in her new life. I feel sure that a winter in the south will do wonders for you.'

'I shall never come back to England any more. Do not look so grieved, Frances. I have chosen the path which I know is most likely to lead to peace. Were I to live for twenty years it would be the same. I shall bid farewell to England and all old associations to-morrow morning.'

'I have no right to question your motives or your determination,' said Frances sadly. 'You have been very good to me, and I have spent many happy hours in this house. May God give you all blessings, wherever you go. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, dear child,' he said, and this time he folded her in his arms and kissed her, as he would have kissed Dulcie.

'Frances,' he said, gently and gravely, 'if I had been a good man I should have asked you to be my

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wife, and then the end of my life might have been very different.'

She looked up at him with the infinite confidence of a woman not over-wise, but unselfishly devoted.

'I can trust you and be happy with you, whatever you are,' she whispered.

'No, love, I would not wrong you so deeply.'

They went out together by the glass door, and along the avenue to the lodge gate, and here they parted for ever. A month later it was known at Austhorpe that Sir Everard Courtenay had turned Romanist, and had joined a Trappist Brotherhood, whose monastery is situated on an elevated plain a few miles from Algiers. Over the door of that monastery appears the inscription, 'No woman must enter here.' Never more upon this earth can Dulcie see her father. His life is of the severest kind. He rises at two every morning to spend silent hours in prayer—he is excused from labour on account of his declining health, for it is known to the fraternity that he has come among them to die. There is an inscription on the wall of the Refectory which faces the new brother as he sits at the frugal meal, and which he

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contemplates often with his sad smile: 'Le plaisir de mourir sans peine vaut bien la peine de vivre sans plaisir.'

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Dulcie is happy, or as nearly happy as it is given to any mortal with a conscience and a heart to be in this world. She carries about with her always, as a part of her own existence, the memory of her father's sorrow and her father's crime—but before the first year of her wedded life is done the English brother is lying at rest in the grave that he dug for himself, far away under the blue southern sky, and it is an unspeakable comfort to her to know that he confessed his sin, and that his whole after life, from the hour in which he sinned, was one long repentance. She believes that the God who might deal hardly with the hardened sinner will surely deal mercifully with the penitent.

* * * * *

So life goes on peacefully, at a jog-trot pace, at Austhorpe, and Tangley, and Blatchmardean. Morton and his wife are a model couple: and Dora Blake is happier, sitting on the sunny lawn with her

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nephew's first baby on her lap, than she has ever been since her brother's untimely death. In all Morton's efforts, in all his triumphs, successes, and disappointments, Lizzie goes with him hand in hand: and though she has now been married nearly two years, she has never yet reproached him for not having taken her advice, nor gloried in the discomfiture due to a neglect of her opinion. In Parliament he has been eminently successful; not because he is a genius, but because he has the rare gift of being a thorough workman. He has spoken often, and well, has been heard with deference, and is supposed to have done good service to the cause he has at heart. Nor has he ever been less than his word in the consideration which he has shown to his wife's relations. Mr. and Mrs. Hardman have been to Tangley, and have been made much of, and have behaved themselves admirably after their own homely fashion. Mary and Mary's husband have also been entertained at the Manor House; and though the self-opinionated printer has bored his host a little by the arrogant assertion of his adverse opinions, Morton has endured the infliction with

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laudable patience, for Mary's sake, that worthy young woman looking up to her husband as an oracle whose opinions ought to be the back-bone of the *Times* newspaper.

But at Tangley Jessie is the favourite. She has given up her sewing machine, except as a useful companion for leisure hours, to assist her in making her own gowns, and innumerable garments for the Tangley and Austhorpe poor. She divides her life between the Manor House and the pretty suburban cottage to which Mr. and Mrs. Hardman have removed the frayed horsehair sofa, untrustworthy clock, and other household gods; a cottage, the freehold whereof has been presented to Uncle Joseph by his niece Mrs. Blake. There is an acre and a half of paddock attached to the cottage, which it is supposed will be carried along in the march of the ages and eventually converted into building land at ten shillings a foot frontage. Mr. Hardman loves to talk about this paddock as a fine thing for his children when he shall be dead and gone, and to plan the sites of future cottages on the green-sward, as he strolls about his freehold of an evening

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smoking his pipe. Jessie is quick and bright, and her sister's influence, with the still stronger influence of refined surroundings, has already smoothed away the rough edges of the vulgarity which struck Lizzie so painfully during her stay in Milton Street. Jessie is fond of reading, and Lizzie has persuaded her to read clever books instead of silly ones. She is fond of society, but is modest and diffident in a circle where she feels herself inferior. She thus gives herself time to learn before she commits herself to much speech; and the general opinion round and about Tangley is in favour of Miss Hardman.

Horatia and Clementine get on comfortably enough in their new home. They bully the duenna, and quarrel with each other a good deal, yet are sworn allies, and are held up as an example of devoted sisters. They have put 'At Home Fridays, 4 to 6,' on their visiting cards, and they entertain all the genteel womanhood of Highclere, and within a driveable distance, at the most elegant style of afternoon tea. Everything in their house which is not early English—of the school of Tottenham Court Road—is unquestionably Japanese. They

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spend a good deal of money on hothouse flowers, and do a great deal of high-art work for charity bazaars. They drive a good deal, visit a good deal, and give all their particular friends to understand, in the strictest confidence, that Morton would have given worlds to retain the light of their presence at the Manor; but that from the moment he began to think of marrying Lizzie Hardman their departure was inevitable.

'And yet we really have no fault to find with Lizzie,' said Horatia, with calm patronage. 'We both liked her immensely—in her place.'

Far away in Boston Mrs. Barnard hears of a legacy which has been left to her by a testator whose name is not to be communicated to her. The legacy is the sum of six thousand pounds in ready money, which is duly paid to Jane Barnard for her own separate use and maintenance, by Messrs. Pherret and Phoolskap, of Lincoln's Inn; and Mrs. Barnard feels very sure that this gift, which reaches her within three months of Sir Everard Courtenay's death, comes to her from that repentant sinner. The money is immediately invested as a sacred trust

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for her sons and daughters, and neither she nor her husband will touch a penny of principal or interest.

Mrs. Aspinall has lost her faithful slave, Louisa Pawker—lost her under circumstances which the dowager tearfully declares to have been of exceptional treachery. Louisa is Miss Pawker no longer; for, after spending a fortnight at the Towers, and shocking the susceptibilities of his sister in every hour of that fortnight, the jovial pork butcher proposed to Mrs. Aspinall's companion, and was promptly and cordially accepted; and now Mrs. Patrick Ryan rules over a boisterous brood of step-children, who hang about her with filial love, and is mistress of a smart villa at Passage, whither her husband retires to a hot supper and unlimited grog after the heat and burden of his day in Cork city. The novelty of the position, the change from being ordered to ordering, from the passive to the active voice of the verb, is intoxicating to Louisa. But she is too sensible to lose her head amidst these happier surroundings; or to play the tyrant because she has had to play the slave; or to be extravagant with her husband's ample means because she has had so long

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to rub through life without any means at all worth speaking of.

Mrs. Aspinall has tried three companions since Louisa's desertion, and they have all three behaved so badly after their divers fashions, that she has now given up the idea of hireling companionship as an impossibility. 'The young woman of the period is utterly unfit to earn her bread anywhere out of the ballet or the refreshment bar,' she informs Frances Grange.

Frances and her brother are still single, and life at Blatchmardean goes on in the old humdrum way, enlivened only by field sports, the delight whereof seems ever new to the earl's children. But rumour hints that a certain wealthy lordling, lately returned from a lengthened cruise in the South Seas, on board his trim steam yacht, a gentleman whose estate lies within ten miles of Blatchmardean, is desperately smitten with Lady Frances. He hunts with the Daleshire, and as he and Frances ride side by side for hours together three times a week, and have been seen to hob-nob in a sheltered corner, over Beville's sandwich-case and sherry-flask, it

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cannot be said that he lacks opportunities to urge his suit; so the prevailing opinion is that there will be a wedding at the castle by-and-by, when the close of the hunting season gives people time to think of such minor details in the business of life.

THE END.

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